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ON

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John Milton

ECLECTIC ENGLISH CLASSICS

AN ESSAY
ON
JOHN MILTON

BY
LORD MACAULAY



NEW YORK ••• CINCINNATI ••• CHICAGO
AMERICAN BOOK COMPANY

1894

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MACAULAY'S MILTON.

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INTRODUCTION.

THOMAS BABINGTON MACAULAY was born in Leicestershire, Oct. 25, 1800. Before he was ten years old he showed a decided bent for literature, and a good deal of juvenile prose and verse attests his precocity. He entered Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1818. He was averse to mathematical and scientific studies, but achieved much distinction at the university by his poems and essays, and by his speeches in the debating society. He received his degree in 1822, and four years later was admitted to the bar.

When, about this time, commercial disaster befell his father, it was plain that Macaulay, upon whom the family support devolved, could not count for maintenance upon his chosen profession of the law. At the instance of powerful friends, he was in 1828 made a commissioner of bankruptcy, and two years afterwards he entered the House of Commons as member for Calne, a pocket borough in the gift of Lord Lansdowne.

In 1834 he was appointed to a seat in the Supreme Council of India. This place he held till 1838, and the munificent salary attached to it (£10,000) gave him the independence needful for the carrying out of his great literary work, the "History of England." His "Essays," by which he is best known to the

general reader, were many of them of the nature of preliminary historical studies. Before his political preferment these pieces had served to increase Macaulay's slender income; those written after his return from India were the outcome of choice and greater leisure.

Macaulay reëntered Parliament in 1839—this time as member for Edinburgh—and became secretary of war in Melbourne's ministry. In 1846 he was paymaster general, as Chatham had been before him.

The first two volumes of his history appeared in 1848, and were followed by two more in 1855. Two years later he was raised to the peerage. He died of heart disease in December, 1859, and was buried in Westminster Abbey, in Poets' Corner, near the statue of Addison.

Macaulay lacked some of the traits we are accustomed to look for in lofty natures. We are told that he was ignorant of the deeper emotions; that his sensibilities were not delicate; that he lacked piety of mind, had no sympathy with high speculation, and displayed but little interest even in the practical problems of science and social life. On the other hand, his virtues were many and great. He was an affectionate friend, and blameless, unselfish, and magnanimous in every relation of life. His nature was simple, manly, and straightforward. He hated lies, liars, and all evil; and one of the reasons he is never dull is that he was deeply in earnest in all he wrote.

Macaulay's powers of memory were very great, and the extent of his reading has perhaps never been exceeded. Like Johnson, Coleridge, and other men of great information, he was an exuberant talker; and like most men who talk well, he was, it may be, a poor listener.

His fame rests on his "Lays of Ancient Rome," his "History of England," and his "Essays." It is with the last that we are here concerned. Though the titles of the essays suggest biography, most of them are in fact detached chapters of history.

Macaulay's style is peculiar to himself. By it he was able to give to written language a good share of the glow and rush of spoken oratory. Critics have pointed to his wealth of epithet, the rhythm of his periods, and the masterly unity of each of his pieces. Yet beyond the reach of analysis there remains a something that is Macaulay's that cannot be defined. "You will ask science in vain to tell you," says Saintsbury, "why some dozen or sixteen of the simplest words in language, arranged by one man, in one fashion, make a permanent addition to the delight of the world, while other words differently arranged by another do not."

The essay upon the poet and statesman of the Commonwealth, of which this book furnishes the text, and which appeared in the "Edinburgh Review" of 1825, while not the first of Macaulay's essays in order of composition, was the first to attract attention to the rising young barrister who had not long before come back to London from the university with a brilliant reputation, and who was already widely known in the literary and political circles of the metropolis. In spite of redundancy and ornament,—defects which are readily excusable in a youthful enthusiast, and which Macaulay himself in the maturity of his judgment condemned,—and a tendency to obscure, in the blaze of Milton's renown, some obvious blemishes of conduct and character, the essay was instantly recognized as the most remarkable contribution to the critical literature of that time,—a verdict which the lapse of nearly three quarters of a century has not disturbed.

JOHN MILTON, "organ-mouth of England," as Tennyson styles him, indisputably, after Shakespeare, the greatest of English poets, was born in London, Dec. 9, 1608. His father, whose name was also John, was by profession a scrivener. The house in Bread Street in which Milton was born, was known as the Spread Eagle, from the device of an eagle with outstretched wings over the doorway. Milton's father was himself a man of superior talents, who had been educated at Oxford University, but had afterwards embraced the doctrines of the Reformed Church. He was the poet's first teacher.

In his tenth year the son was placed under the tuition of Thomas Young, a Puritan minister and an excellent scholar. After two years he was admitted to St. Paul's, a grammar school for classical instruction chiefly, where, as he afterwards wrote, he was "seized with such eagerness for the study of humane letters, that from the twelfth year of my age I scarcely ever went from my lessons to bed before midnight; which, indeed, was the first cause of injury to my eyes."

There is evidence that before Milton's school-days were over he was not only a diligent student of English literature, but could read French and Italian, and had some knowledge of Hebrew. The father, too, though of a serious disposition, was a man of liberal culture, particularly noted as a musician and composer, and it was from him the poet received those first lessons in the delightful art which was to be the solace of his neglected age, and by which his ear was first attuned to the majestic harmonies of "*Paradise Lost*."

With his early readings in Spenser and in Du Bartas, a French religious poet of the sixteenth century, we must connect Milton's first efforts in English verse. Of these, the earliest that remain

are paraphrases of two of the Psalms, published in his later life with the statement that they were written in his sixteenth year, the last year of his stay at St. Paul's School.

On completing the course of study at St. Paul's, Milton was admitted a pensioner at Christ's College, Cambridge, in 1625, where he was soon distinguished for his proficiency in classical learning, and for the ease and elegance of his Latin versification. During his second academic year, in 1626, the beautiful lines "On the Death of a Fair Infant," his first original English poem, were written. Milton remained at Cambridge for seven years, taking his master's degree in 1632, in his twenty-fourth year.

On or about Christmas day, 1629, when in his twenty-first year, Milton composed the ode "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity," which Hallam describes as "perhaps the most beautiful in the English language." To the same period,—that is, in 1630,—belongs the well-known epitaph on Shakespeare, which, as far as is known, was the first of Milton's writings to appear in print.

Milton's parents, in sending him to the university, had in view his entering the Church—that is, the English Church—as a profession, but to this his Puritan training and his own convictions had made him so much averse that the project was abandoned. Before leaving college, indeed, he had expressed a preference for a literary career, for which his genius and the bent of his studies had so evidently destined him; and on repairing to the new home in the village of Horton, about seventeen miles from London, to which his father had retired, he addressed himself seriously to this design. In the seclusion of this retreat, shut out from the world except during occasional visits to London, he devoted the

next five years of his life to an assiduous review of the Greek and Latin classics, not omitting his study of the Italian poets and his readings in English literature. Of this literature but little had been written to interest or attract the student prior to the works of that brilliant galaxy of conspicuous men of Elizabeth's "spacious times," and of the succeeding reign.

Among the poets in this era of England's literary splendor, with whose works we may reasonably presume Milton to have been more or less acquainted, were Spenser, Marlowe, Daniel, Shakespeare, Beaumont, Fletcher, Ben Jonson, and Chapman. Of these Spenser was undoubtedly the favorite, Milton being, as Dryden says, Spenser's "poetical son." The influence of the "Faerie Queene" and the "Pastorals" was clearly traceable in the poems which he was now composing at Horton, and these, if "Paradise Lost" had never been conceived, would have amply satisfied his cherished hope of "an immortality of fame." They were the sonnet "To the Nightingale," "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso," the two masques, "Arcades" and "Comus," and "Lycidas."

In 1638 Milton left England to make his long-contemplated visit to the Continent, then in a greatly disturbed condition by reason of the Thirty Years' War. After a brief stay in Paris, he proceeded leisurely on his journey through southern France towards the goal of his wishes, Italy, going by way of Genoa and Pisa to Florence, where he remained for two months. In that city, the glorious foster mother of art and poesy, Milton explored the galleries and museums, and was soon placed on a footing of friendship with many of its learned men, to whom the beauty of his person and his elegant scholarship commended him. His most interesting meeting of this kind was that with Galileo, then

living in a suburb of Florence, in a seclusion enforced upon him by the Inquisition, for maintaining that the earth moves round the sun. At Rome he spent two months, making diligent study of its antiquities, and extending his acquaintance among its scholars and literati, many of whom were Jesuit priests. Milton then visited, in turn, Naples, Bologna, Venice, and lastly Geneva, setting foot again in England, after an absence of little more than a year, in the summer of 1639.

With his resources somewhat depleted by the expense of his travels, Milton settled in London, and undertook the instruction of his sister's two sons, an occupation that admitted of abundant leisure for the prosecution of his studies, to which he now returned with fresh zest, and with a mind greatly expanded and fructified by his Italian journey.

In 1625 James I. had died, and his son Charles had come to the throne. The doctrine of the "divine right" of kings, though existing as a sort of tradition among English sovereigns, was now defined and formulated for the first time. It asserted that hereditary monarchy was established by direct act of the Supreme Being, that the king could do no wrong, and that no human power could limit or abrogate his authority. It was easy to see that if this odious doctrine were allowed to have free sway, a despotism might be set up on English soil that would speedily stifle the spirit of liberty which was now widely diffused, and deprive the people of many of their most cherished rights. This consummation the people were making ready to resist to the death.

In such a contest it was of course impossible for one like Milton, whose love of freedom had been instilled into him from his youth, to remain neutral. We know, indeed, that his decision had long before been made. He was not, in the strictest sense,

a Puritan. Many of his tastes and associations, his love of art and letters and of the elegancies of life, inclined him to sympathy with the Royalists, or Cavaliers. But in principle a democrat, these traits in his character, so far from making him half-hearted or lukewarm, only served to intensify his hatred of tyranny, and to render his weapons of assault upon it more effective and deadly.

In 1629 the House of Commons, presenting a determined resistance to the king's encroachments on their privileges and to his repeated violations of law, had refused to grant the supplies he demanded, and had extorted from him the Petition of Right, by which he bound himself "never again to raise money without the consent of the Houses, nor imprison any person except in due course of law, nor subject his people to the jurisdiction of courts-martial." This solemn compact, however, Charles took occasion soon after to break. He dissolved the Parliament, which was not again convoked until 1640, and took the reins of government into his own hands. Associating with himself two efficient and willing instruments of oppression, Thomas Wentworth, Earl of Strafford, and William Laud, Archbishop of Canterbury, he reëstablished the infamous Star Chamber and High Commission Courts, the one a political, the other a religious, inquisition, in order to still further rivet his fetters upon the English people. To make this more effective, a standing army was needed, and to provide for its maintenance he revived an old tax, known as "ship money," raised in time of war for maritime defense, never exacted in time of peace, and long fallen into disuse. This act, together with others as arbitrary and illegal, at length thoroughly roused the spirit of the nation. In 1640 that memorable assembly, the Long Parliament, met, and the flames of civil war were

finally kindled. This brief summary of events has been given in order to present a somewhat connected view of the condition of the country, and of the state of parties, at the time Milton began to take an active part in public affairs.

In 1641 Milton entered the lists for the defense of liberty in religion, with the publication of the treatise "Reformation of Church Discipline in England," his first prose work, in which occur passages of sublimity and of rhythmic beauty unsurpassed in our prose literature. This was followed by other tractates upon the same subject, in one of which, "The Reason of Church Government," partly autobiographical, he utters words prophetic of what was to be his life's crowning work, expressing the hope that he "might perhaps leave something so written to after times, as they should not willingly let it die."

In 1643 Milton, after a brief courtship, married Mary Powell, daughter of a Royalist justice of the peace in Oxfordshire. She was but little more than seventeen years of age when he brought her to the new home in Aldersgate Street, London, to which he had removed, and where his father soon after came to live with him. The young wife was not happy in this Puritan household, with the society of a recluse scholar and his somewhat austere way of living. Yielding to her entreaty, Milton presently consented to her spending the summer at her father's house; but when her leave of absence had expired, the gayety and delights of her childhood's home seeming doubly sweet to her, she felt no inclination to return. To Milton's many letters she made no reply, and a messenger sent with a more urgent request was contemptuously dismissed. Discovering his mistake too late, and with the view to justify himself in the step he was contemplating, he published a tract called "The Doctrine and Discipline of

Divorce," which he had actually begun to write before his wife had left him. It must be confessed that in this treatise—followed by a second of like tenor—Milton appears in no very amiable light, as, in defending his thesis with great display of learning, copious reference to the Mosaic law, and quotation of Old and New Testament texts, he shows little consideration for the young and simple girl, less than half his own age, who had committed her future life and happiness into his hands. No proceedings of divorce, however, were instituted, and some time after, through the intercession of friends, a reconciliation was effected, which proved a lasting one.

In 1644 Milton published his "Tractate on Education," in which, discarding the old scholastic methods of study, he outlined a scheme anticipating by nearly two centuries the enlightened views which now prevail. He advocated the teaching of *things* rather than *words*, and a course of systematic instruction in the facts of nature, of life, and of science, together with a training in virtuous conduct and the highest literary culture. In the same year appeared the "Areopagitica," a speech, as he termed it, for the liberty of unlicensed printing, against the oppressive licensing system, or censorship of the press, which had been in operation for some time, and was being enforced with renewed rigor. This is the best known of Milton's pamphlets, and for the sustained vigor and majesty of its style, its splendid eloquence, and its unanswerable logic, is justly considered his greatest work in prose.

In 1645 Milton made a collection of his poems, English, Latin, and Italian, for the press, in which "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso," with others, written long before at Horton, were printed for the first time. In this year, too, the civil war was drawing to an end. The battle of Naseby was fought, resulting

in the complete rout of the Royalist forces, the flight of King Charles to Scotland, and his surrender to the Parliamentary army.

In 1647 his father died, a parent to whose unceasing care and affection he had been so much indebted, and to whose many virtues he had borne grateful testimony fifteen years before in a Latin poem, "*Ad Patrem*." During this year Milton was busy in collecting material for a Latin dictionary and for a history of Britain from the earliest times to the Norman Conquest, and in the preparation of a complete "*Digest of Christian Doctrine*," labors from which he was diverted, however, by the more imperative duties which he was presently called to assume in the new government.

The year 1649 was a momentous one, for in that year, with monarchy destroyed in the person of the king, were laid the foundations of a republic, known to all after time as the Commonwealth. To its constitution Milton at once gave in his adhesion by his publication of the "*Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*," a reply to the pamphlets and sermons of the English Presbyterian clergy, who were now representing the moderate party, and were protesting against the execution of the king.

Milton, now in his forty-first year, was selected by the chiefs of the Republican party to be their Latin secretary in the newly created Council of State, to conduct their foreign correspondence in that tongue in which he was so eminently skilled, and which at that time was universally in use for that purpose. Among other work assigned him by the Council was a reply to a book, "*Eikon Basiliké*" (*The Royal Image*), which had appeared but a short time after the king's death, and which, purporting to be by the king's own hand, was regarded as a sort of spiritual autobiography of his last years. This reply was called "*Eikono-*

klastes" (Image-Breaker), in which, following the text of the king's book, Milton commented upon each passage in a spirit of animosity towards the royal martyr, more trenchant, direct, and personal than he had shown even in the "Tenure."

His great labor during the year 1650 was the preparation, by order of the Council, of the "*Defensio pro Populo Anglicano*" (Defense of the English People), in answer to Claude de Sau-maise, better known by his Latinized name of Salmasius. The latter was a Frenchman born, but for some time settled in Leyden, and a scholar of immense erudition, who had been employed by Charles II., then in refuge at the Hague, to write a defense of the monarchy. The "*Defensio*" demolished this apology for the king as though it were a house of cards, and was the first of Milton's prose works to give him celebrity on the Continent. In reviewing it, however, at this distance of time, one cannot fail to be amazed at the ferocity which Milton displayed in his methods of attack, and at the abuse and scurrility heaped without stint, and so undeservedly, upon Salmasius. With all due allowance for the customs then prevailing in this kind of warfare, it is difficult to make excuse for him, or to reconcile our ideal of his character with the author of this defense. A melancholy interest attaches to it, which should soften the asperity of criticism, for, working upon it night and day, it was completed finally at great and irreparable loss to himself,—that of his sight.

In 1654 his Second Defense was published, one of the most interesting of his writings, by reason of its numerous passages of autobiography, its eloquent eulogy of Cromwell and other notable men of the Commonwealth, and its noble self-defense and expression of his consolation under the affliction of blindness, with which his adversaries had reproached him. The sensation

created on the Continent by this work was enormous. The attention of scholars and statesmen in France, Germany, Holland, and Sweden was at once drawn to it, and we are told that, without exception, every foreigner then resident in London in an official capacity, called upon Milton personally to offer his congratulations. It would be idle, perhaps, to speculate how widely its influence was disseminated in those countries, but unquestionably in England this and other of Milton's prose works were largely instrumental in instructing the public conscience, and in upbuilding and fortifying that public opinion of which the Commonwealth had been a natural outgrowth, and which has rendered possible constitutional government as it exists in England and in America to-day.

Milton's first wife died in 1652, leaving three daughters; and after four years' widowerhood, in 1656 he married Catherine, daughter of a Captain Woodcock of London, who died within a year after their union, and to whose memory he paid affectionate tribute in one of the most beautiful of his sonnets.

Of the long series of letters addressed by Milton, as Latin secretary for the government, to the foreign powers, more than two thirds were dictated during Oliver Cromwell's Protectorate, a fact remarkable, if it is considered that when he entered the Protector's service, in 1653, he had become totally blind.

It was in May, 1658, that Milton returned to the design of writing an epic poem, which he had meditated eighteen years before, soon after his journey to Italy, and which he had then thought of treating in the form of a sacred tragedy. The mythical exploits of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table had at one time taken a strong hold upon his imagination, and he had contemplated making them the subject of his great poem,

but he now settled finally upon that of "Paradise Lost," in which he proposed to recount the story of

"Man's first disobedience and the fruit
Of that forbidden tree."

Early in the year 1660 Milton published the "Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth," the last of his writings of this kind of special significance, and his last effort to stay the returning tide, upon the topmost wave of which the "Merry Monarch" was seated. Two months later the Restoration was accomplished, and Milton, abandoning his post only when all hope was gone, and leaving his home secretly, went to live in hiding with a friend in an obscure part of London. There he remained in concealment, in constant danger of discovery, for over three months, while his fate hung in the balance. His escape finally from the doom of so many others, far less prominent in the affairs of the Commonwealth, was owing to the accidental omission of his name from among the "exceptions" in the bill of indemnity, and is to be regarded as little short of miraculous.

Towards the end of the year 1662 he had dictated about one half of "Paradise Lost," the actual composition of which he had begun in 1658, four years before. In this work he was assisted somewhat unwillingly by his daughters, who, strange to say, had been very imperfectly educated; and some of the friends who were still faithful to him, among them Thomas Ellwood, the Quaker, aided him with their criticisms.

In this year, 1662, Milton, then fifty-four years old, married for his third wife a young lady of good family, who proved a faithful companion and helpmeet to him to the end of his life.

It was in a house in Artillery Walk, near what was then known as Bunhill Fields, and the last of his many London residences, that "*Paradise Lost*" was completed, in the autumn of 1665, and two years later, in 1667, after thorough revision, it was given to the world.

The reception of such a poem, with the "*Fall of Man*" for its theme, in which were to be found in such rich profusion "things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme," was necessarily cold in that irreverent and licentious age. But among the learned and the judicious few it speedily gained many admirers. Andrew Marvell, Milton's old-time friend and associate, wrote some commendatory verses upon it, and Dryden, recognizing the new and greater light dawning upon England, was generous in its praise.

In 1670 appeared the long deferred "*History of Britain*." The work is chiefly valuable to students of English literature for its entertaining collection and abstract of the British legends of the mythical, or pre-Roman, period, and those pertaining to King Arthur.

About this time, Milton's three daughters finally separated from him. Long dissatisfied with their task of reading to him from books, many of them in foreign tongues, of which they knew nothing, and chafing under his parental restraint, they determined to make provision for their future livelihood by learning "some ingenious sorts of manufacture proper for women to learn," for which purpose he furnished them the means of support, at great expense to himself, out of his impaired estate.

The year was made further memorable by the appearance in one volume of two poems, "*Paradise Regained*" and "*Samson Agonistes*." The "*Paradise Regained*," in which the Evangelist's simple story of Christ's temptation is enriched and amplified

in the glowing fires of Milton's imagination, with a splendor of diction and a wealth of imagery to which no English writer since Shakespeare could make pretension, was no doubt suggested to him some years before, by the Quaker Ellwood, who on returning the manuscript of "Paradise Lost" remarked: "Thou hast said much here of Paradise lost, but what hast thou to say of Paradise found?" "Samson Agonistes" is a lyrical drama, which, though in form modeled strictly upon those of ancient Greece, Milton's genius has made an English classic, elevated and inspiring in thought and language, and of exquisite metrical structure. A "Treatise on Logic," a second edition of his "Minor Poems," and a tract called "True Religion and Toleration," were the last works upon which his still active and alert mind was engaged.

In the summer of 1674 the gout was making serious inroads upon his health, but it was not until autumn that the disease assumed a threatening form, when, after a brief illness, comparatively free from pain, he expired on Sunday, Nov. 8, 1674, wanting but one month of being sixty-six years of age. He was buried in the church of St. Giles, Cripplegate, London, beside his father, and according to the rites of the Church of England.

A posthumous work by Milton, a "Treatise on Christian Doctrine," was discovered in 1823 among the state papers, where it had been lying in manuscript for over a hundred and fifty years. This was edited and published in the original Latin and in an English translation, by Rev. Charles R. Sumner, in 1825, and the appearance of this translation was the occasion of the following essay by Macaulay. In this, his final confession of faith as we may consider it, Milton appears to have wandered from his primitive Calvinistic beliefs to something almost identical with modern Unitarian doctrines.

MILTON.¹

[*Edinburgh Review*, August, 1825.]

TOWARDS the close of the year 1823, Mr. Lemon, deputy keeper of the state papers, in the course of his researches among the presses of his office met with a large Latin manuscript. With it were found corrected copies of the foreign dispatches written by Milton while he filled the office of secretary,² and several papers relating to the Popish Trials and the Rye House Plot.³ The whole was wrapped up in an envelope, superscribed, *To Mr. Skinner, Merchant*. On examination the large manuscript proved to be the long lost essay on the Doctrines of Christianity, which, according to Wood and Toland, Milton finished after the Restoration, and deposited with Cyriac Skinner. Skinner, it is well known, held the same political opinions with his illustrious friend. It is therefore probable, as Mr. Lemon conjectures, that he may have fallen under the suspicions of the government during that persecution of the Whigs⁴ which followed the dissolution of the Oxford Parliament;⁵ and that, in

¹ *Joannis Miltoni, Angli, de Doctrinâ Christianâ libri duo posthumi*. A Treatise on Christian Doctrine, compiled from the Holy Scriptures alone. By JOHN MILTON, translated from the original by Charles R. Sumner, M.A., etc., 1825.

² See Introduction, p. 15.

³ A conspiracy to assassinate Charles II. It was discovered, and several prominent persons implicated in it suffered death.

⁴ A political party which took its rise in the reign of Charles I., and which was devoted to the cause of popular rights.

⁵ During the civil war, Oxford was for a time the headquarters of King Charles, and the meeting place of his Parliaments.

consequence of a general seizure of his papers, this work may have been brought to the office in which it has been found. But whatever the adventures of the manuscript may have been, no doubt can exist that it is a genuine relic of the great poet.

Mr. Sumner, who was commanded by his Majesty to edit and translate the treatise, has acquitted himself of his task in a manner honorable to his talents and to his character. His version is not, indeed, very easy or elegant; but it is entitled to the praise of clearness and fidelity. His notes abound with interesting quotations, and have the rare merit of really elucidating the text. The preface is evidently the work of a sensible and candid man, firm in his own religious opinions, and tolerant towards those of others.

The book itself will not add much to the fame of Milton. It is, like all his Latin works, well written, though not exactly in the style of the prize essays of Oxford and Cambridge.¹ There is no elaborate imitation of classical antiquity, no scrupulous purity, none of the ceremonial cleanness which characterizes the diction of our academical Pharisees. The author does not attempt to polish and brighten his composition into the Ciceronian² gloss and brilliancy. He does not, in short, sacrifice sense and spirit to pedantic refinements. The nature of his subject compelled him to use many words

“That would have made Quintilian³ stare and gasp.”

But he writes with as much ease and freedom as if Latin were his mother tongue; and, where he is least happy, his failure seems to arise from the carelessness of a native, not from the ignorance

¹ Oxford and Cambridge are the two great universities of England.

² Marcus Tullius Cicero (106–43 B.C.), an orator, statesman, and man of letters of the first rank in ancient Rome. With a somewhat diffuse and ornate style, he possessed great vehemence and power of invective.

³ Quintilian (A.D. 35–96), a teacher of eloquence in Rome, who wrote a complete treatise on rhetoric and oratory. The line is from one of Milton's sonnets.

of a foreigner. We may apply to him what Denham¹ with great felicity says of Cowley.² He wears the garb, but not the clothes, of the ancients.

Throughout the volume are discernible the traces of a powerful and independent mind, emancipated from the influence of authority, and devoted to the search of truth. Milton professes to form his system from the Bible alone; and his digest of scriptural texts is certainly among the best that have appeared. But he is not always so happy in his inferences as in his citations.

Some of the heterodox doctrines which he avows seem to have excited considerable amazement, particularly his Arianism,³ and his theory on the subject of polygamy.⁴ Yet we can scarcely conceive that any person could have read the "Paradise Lost" without suspecting him of the former; nor do we think that any reader, acquainted with the history of his life, ought to be much startled at the latter. The opinions which he has expressed respecting the nature of the Deity, the eternity of matter, and the observation of the Sabbath, might, we think, have caused more just surprise.

But we will not go into the discussion of these points. The book, were it far more orthodox or far more heretical than it is, would not much edify or corrupt the present generation. The men of our time are not to be converted or perverted by quartos.⁵ A few more days and this essay will follow the "Defensio Populi"⁶ to the dust and silence of the upper shelf. The name of

¹ Sir John Denham (1615-68), a writer and poet contemporary with Milton, chiefly known by his *Cooper's Hill*, a poem descriptive of the Thames.

² Abraham Cowley (1618-67), a poet highly esteemed in his time, best known to modern readers by his essays, written in an easy and graceful style. He was a Royalist in the civil war.

³ A theological system, named after Arius, a presbyter of Alexandria (third century), denying a trinity of coequal persons in the Godhead.

⁴ A plurality of wives. Milton's views on the subject are found in his works on divorce.

⁵ Books in which the leaves are twice folded, making four leaves.

⁶ See Introduction, p. 16.

its author, and the remarkable circumstances attending its publication, will secure to it a certain degree of attention. For a month or two it will occupy a few minutes of chat in every drawing-room, and a few columns in every magazine; and it will then, to borrow the elegant language of the playbills, be withdrawn to make room for the forthcoming novelties.

We wish, however, to avail ourselves of the interest, transient as it may be, which this work has excited. The dexterous Capuchins¹ never choose to preach on the life and miracles of a saint till they have awakened the devotional feelings of their auditors by exhibiting some relic of him,—a thread of his garment, a lock of his hair, or a drop of his blood. On the same principle, we intend to take advantage of the late interesting discovery, and, while this memorial of a great and good man is still in the hands of all, to say something of his moral and intellectual qualities. Nor, we are convinced, will the severest of our readers blame us if, on an occasion like the present, we turn for a short time from the topics of the day, to commemorate, in all love and reverence, the genius and virtues of John Milton, the poet, the statesman, the philosopher, the glory of English literature, the champion and the martyr of English liberty.

It is by his poetry that Milton is best known; and it is of his poetry that we wish first to speak. By the general suffrage of the civilized world, his place has been assigned among the greatest masters of the art. His detractors, however, though outvoted, have not been silenced. There are many critics, and some of great name, who contrive in the same breath to extol the poems and to decry the poet. The works they acknowledge, considered in themselves, may be classed among the noblest productions of the human mind. But they will not allow the author to rank with those great men, who, born in the infancy of civilization, supplied by their own powers the want of instruction; and,

¹ A branch of the Franciscan Order in the Roman Catholic Church, so named from the *capuche*, or cowl, worn by the monks in imitation of St. Francis.

though destitute of models themselves, bequeathed to posterity models which defy imitation. Milton, it is said, inherited what his predecessors created: he lived in an enlightened age; he received a finished education; and we must, therefore, if we would form a just estimate of his powers, make large deductions in consideration of these advantages.

We venture to say, on the contrary, paradoxical as the remark may appear, that no poet has ever had to struggle with more unfavorable circumstances than Milton. He doubted, as he has himself owned, whether he had not been born "an age too late." For this notion Johnson¹ has thought fit to make him the butt of much clumsy ridicule. The poet, we believe, understood the nature of his art better than the critic. He knew that his poetical genius derived no advantage from the civilization which surrounded him, or from the learning which he had acquired; and he looked back with something like regret to the ruder age of simple words and vivid impressions.

We think that as civilization advances poetry almost necessarily declines. Therefore, though we fervently admire those great works of imagination which have appeared in dark ages, we do not admire them the more because they have appeared in dark ages. On the contrary, we hold that the most wonderful and splendid proof of genius is a great poem produced in a civilized age. We cannot understand why those who believe in that most orthodox article of literary faith, that the earliest poets are generally the best, should wonder at the rule as if it were the exception. Surely, the uniformity of the phenomenon indicates a corresponding uniformity in the cause.

The fact is, that common observers reason from the progress of the experimental sciences to that of the imitative arts. The

¹ Dr. Samuel Johnson (1709-84), the most famous man of letters of the eighteenth century in England. He wrote an English Dictionary, *The Rambler* (a series of papers in the style of *The Spectator*), *Lives of the Poets*, etc. His *Life of Milton* does scant justice to the poet, owing to Johnson's violent Tory prejudices.

improvement of the former is gradual and slow. Ages are spent in collecting materials, ages more in separating and combining them. Even when a system has been formed, there is still something to add, to alter, or to reject. Every generation enjoys the use of a vast hoard bequeathed to it by antiquity, and transmits that hoard, augmented by fresh acquisitions, to future ages. In these pursuits, therefore, the first speculators lie under great disadvantages, and, even when they fail, are entitled to praise. Their pupils, with far inferior intellectual powers, speedily surpass them in actual attainments. Every girl who has read Mrs. Marcet's¹ little dialogues on political economy could teach Montague² or Walpole³ many lessons in finance. Any intelligent man may now, by resolutely applying himself for a few years to mathematics, learn more than the great Newton⁴ knew after half a century of study and meditation.

But it is not thus with music, with painting, or with sculpture. Still less is it thus with poetry. The progress of refinement rarely supplies these arts with better objects of imitation. It may indeed improve the instruments which are necessary to the mechanical operations of the musician, the sculptor, and the painter. But language, the machine of the poet, is best fitted for his purpose in its rudest state. Nations, like individuals, first perceive and then abstract. They advance from particular images to general terms. Hence the vocabulary of an enlightened society is philosophical; that of a half-civilized people is poetical.

¹ Mrs. Marcet (1769-1858), a writer on educational subjects, notably natural philosophy and political economy. The latter is the science pertaining to the production and distribution of wealth.

² Charles Montague, Lord Halifax (1661-1715), a poet, financier, and statesman, Chancellor of the Exchequer in the reign of William III.

³ Sir Robert Walpole (1676-1745) was distinguished as a statesman, also as Chancellor of the Exchequer under George I. and George II.

⁴ Sir Isaac Newton (1642-1727), the greatest of English mathematicians and natural philosophers. He discovered the law of gravitation, shared with Leibnitz the honor of discovering the calculus, and made many original and brilliant discoveries in optics.

This change in the language of men is partly the cause and partly the effect of a corresponding change in the nature of their intellectual operations, of a change by which science gains and poetry loses. Generalization is necessary to the advancement of knowledge; but particularity is indispensable to the creations of the imagination. In proportion as men know more and think more, they look less at individuals and more at classes. They therefore make better theories and worse poems. They give us vague phrases instead of images, and personified qualities instead of men. They may be better able to analyze human nature than their predecessors. But analysis is not the business of the poet. His office is to portray, not to dissect. He may believe in a moral sense, like Shaftesbury;¹ he may refer all human actions to self-interest, like Helvetius;² or he may never think about the matter at all. His creed on such subjects will no more influence his poetry, properly so called, than the notions which a painter may have conceived respecting the lachrymal glands, or the circulation of the blood, will affect the tears of his Niobe,³ or the blushes of his Aurora.⁴ If Shakespeare had written a book on the motives of human actions, it is by no means certain that it would have been a good one. It is extremely improbable that it would have contained half so much able reasoning on the subject as is to be found in the "Fable of the Bees." But could

¹ Earl of Shaftesbury (1671-1713), a philosopher, who in his *Characteristics*, written in a superfine style, maintained that everything in the world is for the best.

² Helvetius (1715-71), a French philosopher. The central idea in his system of philosophy was that self-interest is the motive power in human conduct.

³ A character in Greek mythology, who had twelve children, and who taunted Latona for having only two, Apollo and Diana. Latona, enraged, compelled her children to slay all those of Niobe, who was then changed into stone on a mountain in Lydia. From this stone, drops of water like tears were said to flow every summer.

⁴ The goddess of dawn, according to the Greek myth, who preceded the Sun in his rising.

Mandeville¹ have created an Iago?² Well as he knew how to resolve characters into their elements, would he have been able to combine those elements in such a manner as to make up a man,—a real, living, individual man?

Perhaps no person can be a poet, or can even enjoy poetry, without a certain unsoundness of mind, if anything which gives so much pleasure ought to be called unsoundness. By poetry we mean not all writing in verse, nor even all good writing in verse. Our definition excludes many metrical compositions which, on other grounds, deserve the highest praise. By poetry we mean the art of employing words in such a manner as to produce an illusion on the imagination, the art of doing by means of words what the painter does by means of colors. Thus the greatest of poets has described it, in lines universally admired for the vigor and felicity of their diction, and still more valuable on account of the just notion which they convey of the art in which he excelled:—

“As imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.”³

These are the fruits of the “fine frenzy” which he ascribes to the poet,—a fine frenzy, doubtless, but still a frenzy. Truth, indeed, is essential to poetry; but it is the truth of madness. The reasonings are just; but the premises are false. After the first suppositions have been made, everything ought to be consistent; but those first suppositions require a degree of credulity which almost amounts to a partial and temporary derangement of the intellect. Hence of all people children are the most imagina-

¹ Bernard de Mandeville (1670–1733), an ethical and satirical writer who, in his *Fable of the Bees*, asserted that private vices are public benefits, and that all virtue has its root in selfishness.

² A leading character in Shakespeare's *Othello*, and a type of utter depravity.

³ Shakespeare's *Midsummer-Night's Dream*, act v., sc. 1.

tive. They abandon themselves without reserve to every illusion. Every image which is strongly presented to their mental eye produces on them the effect of reality. No man, whatever his sensibility may be, is ever affected by Hamlet or Lear¹ as a little girl is affected by the story of poor Red Ridinghood. She knows that it is all false, that wolves cannot speak, that there are no wolves in England. Yet in spite of her knowledge she believes; she weeps; she trembles; she dares not go into a dark room lest she should feel the teeth of the monster at her throat. Such is the despotism of the imagination over uncultivated minds.

In a rude state of society men are children with a greater variety of ideas. It is therefore in such a state of society that we may expect to find the poetical temperament in its highest perfection. In an enlightened age there will be much intelligence, much science, much philosophy, abundance of just classification and subtle analysis, abundance of wit and eloquence, abundance of verses, and even of good ones; but little poetry. Men will judge and compare; but they will not create. They will talk about the old poets, and comment on them, and to a certain degree enjoy them. But they will scarcely be able to conceive the effect which poetry produced on their ruder ancestors,—the agony, the ecstasy, the plenitude of belief. The Greek Rhapsodists,² according to Plato,³ could scarce recite Homer⁴ without falling into convulsions. The Mohawk⁵ hardly feels the scalping knife while he shouts his death song. The power which the ancient bards of Wales and Germany exercised over their

¹ Two of Shakespeare's greatest tragedies.

² The Rhapsodists were a class of men in ancient Greece who went from place to place reciting poetry, principally from the two epic poems of Homer, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

³ A great philosopher of Athens, born about 427 B.C. He was a pupil of Socrates, of whose life and teachings he wrote in his *Dialogues*.

⁴ The reputed author of the two great Greek epic poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. The subject of the former is the ten years' siege of Troy, and the latter describes the adventures of Ulysses in returning from Troy.

⁵ The Mohawks are a tribe of North American Indians.

auditors seems to modern readers almost miraculous. Such feelings are very rare in a civilized community, and most rare among those who participate most in its improvements. They linger longest among the peasantry.

Poetry produces an illusion on the eye of the mind, as a magic lantern produces an illusion on the eye of the body. And, as the magic lantern acts best in a dark room, poetry effects its purpose most completely in a dark age. As the light of knowledge breaks in upon its exhibitions, as the outlines of certainty become more and more definite, and the shades of probability more and more distinct, the hues and lineaments of the phantoms which the poet calls up grow fainter and fainter. We cannot unite the incompatible advantages of reality and deception, the clear discernment of truth, and the exquisite enjoyment of fiction.

He who, in an enlightened and literary society, aspires to be a great poet, must first become a little child. He must take to pieces the whole web of his mind. He must unlearn much of that knowledge which has perhaps constituted hitherto his chief title to superiority. His very talents will be a hindrance to him. His difficulties will be proportioned to his proficiency in the pursuits which are fashionable among his contemporaries; and that proficiency will in general be proportioned to the vigor and activity of his mind. And it is well if, after all his sacrifices and exertions, his works do not resemble a lisping man or a modern ruin. We have seen in our own time great talents, intense labor, and long meditation employed in this struggle against the spirit of the age, and employed, we will not say absolutely in vain, but with dubious success and feeble applause.

If these reasonings be just, no poet has ever triumphed over greater difficulties than Milton. He received a learned education; he was a profound and elegant classical scholar; he had studied all the mysteries of Rabbinical literature;¹ he was inti-

¹ Rabbinical literature (from Hebrew *rabbi*, meaning "master") is that of the Jews in the later periods of their history.

mately acquainted with every language of modern Europe from which either pleasure or information was then to be derived. He was perhaps the only great poet of later times who has been distinguished by the excellence of his Latin verse. The genius of Petrarch¹ was scarcely of the first order; and his poems in the ancient language, though much praised by those who have never read them, are wretched compositions. Cowley, with all his admirable wit and ingenuity, had little imagination; nor indeed do we think his classical diction comparable to that of Milton. The authority of Johnson is against us on this point. But Johnson had studied the bad writers of the middle ages till he had become utterly insensible to the Augustan² elegance, and was as ill qualified to judge between two Latin styles as a habitual drunkard to set up for a wine taster.

Versification in a dead language is an exotic, a farfetched, costly, sickly imitation of that which elsewhere may be found in healthful and spontaneous perfection. The soils on which this rarity flourishes are in general as ill suited to the production of vigorous native poetry as the flowerpots of a hothouse to the growth of oaks. That the author of the "Paradise Lost" should have written the "Epistle to Manso"³ was truly wonderful. Never before were such marked originality and such exquisite mimicry found together. Indeed, in all the Latin poems of Milton, the artificial manner indispensable to such works is admirably preserved, while, at the same time, his genius gives to them a peculiar charm, an air of nobleness and freedom, which distinguishes them from all other writings of the same class. They remind us

¹ The greatest of Italian lyric poets (1304-74), and one of the most learned men of his time, who collected and transcribed several precious Latin manuscripts.

² Referring to the reign of the first Roman emperor, Augustus (63 B.C.—A.D. 14), a period of great refinement in literature, as shown in the writings of Horace, Virgil, Ovid, and others.

³ A Latin poem addressed by Milton, when in Italy, to a nobleman by whom he was entertained, a friend of the poet Tasso.

of the amusements of those angelic warriors who composed the cohort of Gabriel:—

“About him exercised heroic games
The unarmed youth of heaven; but nigh at hand
Celestial armory, shields, helms, and spears,
Hung high, with diamond flaming and with gold.”¹

We cannot look upon the sportive exercises for which the genius of Milton ungirds itself, without catching a glimpse of the gorgeous and terrible panoply which it is accustomed to wear. The strength of his imagination triumphed over every obstacle. So intense and ardent was the fire of his mind, that it not only was not suffocated beneath the weight of fuel, but penetrated the whole superincumbent mass with its own heat and radiance.

It is not our intention to attempt anything like a complete examination of the poetry of Milton. The public has long been agreed as to the merit of the most remarkable passages, the incomparable harmony of the numbers, and the excellence of that style which no rival has been able to equal and no parodist to degrade, which displays in their highest perfection the idiomatic powers of the English tongue, and to which every ancient and every modern language has contributed something of grace, of energy, or of music. In the vast field of criticism on which we are entering, innumerable reapers have already put their sickles. Yet the harvest is so abundant that the negligent search of a straggling gleaner may be rewarded with a sheaf.

The most striking characteristic of the poetry of Milton is the extreme remoteness of the associations by means of which it acts on the reader. Its effect is produced, not so much by what it expresses, as by what it suggests; not so much by the ideas which it directly conveys, as by other ideas which are connected with them. He electrifies the mind through conductors. The most unimaginative man must understand the *Iliad*.² Homer

¹ Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Book IV., lines 551-54.

² See Note 4, p. 29.

gives him no choice, and requires from him no exertion, but takes the whole upon himself, and sets the images in so clear a light that it is impossible to be blind to them. The works of Milton cannot be comprehended or enjoyed unless the mind of the reader coöperate with that of the writer. He does not paint a finished picture, or play for a mere passive listener. He sketches, and leaves others to fill up the outline. He strikes the keynote, and expects his hearer to make out the melody.

We often hear of the magical influence of poetry. The expression in general means nothing; but, applied to the writings of Milton, it is most appropriate. His poetry acts like an incantation. Its merit lies less in its obvious meaning than in its occult power. There would seem, at first sight, to be no more in his words than in other words. But they are words of enchantment. No sooner are they pronounced, than the past is present and the distant near. New forms of beauty start at once into existence, and all the burial places of the memory give up their dead. Change the structure of the sentence; substitute one synonym for another, and the whole effect is destroyed. The spell loses its power; and he who should then hope to conjure with it would find himself as much mistaken as Cassim in the Arabian tale, when he stood crying, "Open Wheat," "Open Barley," to the door which obeyed no sound but "Open Sesame."¹ The miserable failure of Dryden² in his attempt to translate into his own diction some parts of the "Paradise Lost" is a remarkable instance of this.

In support of these observations we may remark, that scarcely any passages in the poems of Milton are more generally known, or more frequently repeated, than those which are little more than muster rolls of names. They are not always more appropri-

¹ An East Indian grain. The name is used in one of the tales of the Arabian Nights as a password to a robbers' cave.

² John Dryden (1631-1700), eminent as poet and prose writer. Among his works is a translation of Virgil's *Æneid*. The reference here is to his sacred opera based on *Paradise Lost*.

ate or more melodious than other names. But they are charmed names. Every one of them is the first link in a long chain of associated ideas. Like the dwelling place of our infancy revisited in manhood, like the song of our country heard in a strange land, they produce upon us an effect wholly independent of their intrinsic value. One transports us back to a remote period of history. Another places us among the novel scenes and manners of a distant region. A third evokes all the dear classical recollections of childhood,—the schoolroom, the dog-eared Virgil,¹ the holiday, and the prize. A fourth brings before us the splendid phantoms of chivalrous romance,—the trophied lists, the embroidered housings, the quaint devices, the haunted forests, the enchanted gardens, the achievements of enamored knights, and the smiles of rescued princesses.

In none of the works of Milton is his peculiar manner more happily displayed than in the "*Allegro*" and the "*Penseroso*."² It is impossible to conceive that the mechanism of language can be brought to a more exquisite degree of perfection. These poems differ from others as ottar of roses differs from ordinary rose water, the close-packed essence from the thin, diluted mixture. They are, indeed, not so much poems as collections of hints, from each of which the reader is to make out a poem for himself. Every epithet is a text for a stanza.

The "*Comus*" and the "*Samson Agonistes*" are works which, though of very different merit, offer some marked points of resemblance. Both are lyric poems in the form of plays. There are, perhaps, no two kinds of composition so essentially dissimilar as the drama and the ode. The business of the dramatist is to keep himself out of sight, and to let nothing appear but his characters. As soon as he attracts notice to his personal feelings, the illusion is broken. The effect is as unpleasant as that

¹ Virgil (70–19 B.C.), a pastoral and didactic Roman poet, author of the *Æneid*, the greatest Latin epic.

² *Allegro* and *Penseroso* mean "mirthful" and "melancholy." The two opposite emotions are beautifully expressed in the poems.

which is produced on the stage by the voice of a prompter or the entrance of a scenshifter. Hence it was that the tragedies of Byron were his least successful performances. They resemble those pasteboard pictures invented by the friend of children, Mr. Newberry, in which a single movable head goes round twenty different bodies, so that the same face looks out upon us, successively, from the uniform of a hussar, the furs of a judge, and the rags of a beggar. In all the characters,—patriots and tyrants, haters and lovers,—the frown and sneer of Harold ¹ were discernible in an instant. But this species of egotism, though fatal to the drama, is the inspiration of the ode. It is the part of the lyric poet to abandon himself, without reserve, to his own emotions.

Between these hostile elements many great men have endeavored to effect an amalgamation, but never with complete success. The Greek drama, on the model of which the "Samson" was written, sprang from the ode. The dialogue was ingrafted on the chorus, and naturally partook of its character. The genius of the greatest of the Athenian dramatists coöperated with the circumstances under which tragedy made its first appearance. *Æschylus* ² was, head and heart, a lyric poet. In his time the Greeks had far more intercourse with the East than in the days of Homer; and they had not yet acquired that immense superiority in war, in science, and in the arts, which, in the following generation, led them to treat the Asiatics with contempt. From the narrative of Herodotus ³ it should seem that they still looked

¹ Childe Harold was the first of his many poems in which Lord Byron (1788–1824) gave free vent to the cynicism and misanthropy so characteristic of them all.

² *Æschylus*, *Sophocles*, and *Euripides*, the three great Greek tragedians, flourished in the fifth century B.C., and represent respectively the rise, the culmination, and the decline of Greek tragedy. Only a few of their many dramas survive. The greatest work of *Æschylus*, *Prometheus Bound*, was evidently one of Milton's sources of inspiration in writing *Paradise Lost*, although *Euripides* was his favorite.

³ Herodotus, born about 484 B.C., was called "the father of history." He visited and wrote about most of the then civilized portions of the globe.

up, with the veneration of disciples, to Egypt and Assyria. At this period, accordingly, it was natural that the literature of Greece should be tinctured with the Oriental style. And that style, we think, is discernible in the works of Pindar¹ and Æschylus. The latter often reminds us of the Hebrew writers. The Book of Job, indeed, in conduct and diction, bears a considerable resemblance to some of his dramas. Considered as plays, his works are absurd; considered as choruses, they are above all praise. If, for instance, we examine the address of Clytemnestra to Agamemnon² on his return, or the description of the seven Argive chiefs,³ by the principles of dramatic writing, we shall instantly condemn them as monstrous. But if we forget the characters, and think only of the poetry, we shall admit that it has never been surpassed in energy and magnificence. Sophocles made the Greek drama as dramatic as was consistent with its original form. His portraits of men have a sort of similarity; but it is the similarity not of a painting, but of a bas-relief. It suggests a resemblance; but it does not produce an illusion. Euripides attempted to carry the reform further. But it was a task far beyond his powers, perhaps beyond any powers. Instead of correcting what was bad, he destroyed what was excellent. He substituted crutches for stilts, bad sermons for good odes.

Milton, it is well known, admired Euripides highly; much more highly than, in our opinion, Euripides deserved. Indeed, the caresses which this partiality leads our countryman to bestow on "sad Electra's⁴ poet," sometimes remind us of the beautiful

¹ Pindar, born about 520 B.C., was the greatest of Greek lyric poets. He wrote hymns to the gods, triumphal odes, choric songs, etc., in an elevated, but rather abrupt and obscure, style.

² One of the Greek heroes of Homer's *Iliad*. Clytemnestra, his wife, conspiring with her lover, slew him on his return from Troy.

³ These were Polynices, son of Œdipus, his father-in-law, King Adrastus of Argos, and five other princes, with whom he made war upon Thebes when deprived of his share in its government. The story is told in *The Seven against Thebes*, one of the dramas of Æschylus.

⁴ Electra is the name of one of the plays of Euripides.

Queen of Fairyland kissing the long ears of Bottom.¹ At all events, there can be no doubt that this veneration for the Athenian, whether just or not, was injurious to the "Samson Agonistes." Had Milton taken Æschylus for his model, he would have given himself up to the lyric inspiration, and poured out profusely all the treasures of his mind, without bestowing a thought on those dramatic proprieties which the nature of the work rendered it impossible to preserve. In the attempt to reconcile things in their own nature inconsistent, he has failed, as every one else must have failed. We cannot identify ourselves with the characters, as in a good play. We cannot identify ourselves with the poet, as in a good ode. The conflicting ingredients, like an acid and an alkali mixed, neutralize each other. We are by no means insensible to the merits of this celebrated piece, to the severe dignity of the style, the graceful and pathetic solemnity of the opening speech, or the wild and barbaric melody which gives so striking an effect to the choral passages. But we think it, we confess, the least successful effort of the genius of Milton.

The "Comus" is framed on the model of the Italian masque,² as the "Samson" is framed on the model of the Greek tragedy. It is certainly the noblest performance of the kind which exists in any language. It is as far superior to the "Faithful Shepherdess"³ as the "Faithful Shepherdess" is to the "Aminta,"³ or the "Aminta" to the "Pastor Fido."³ It was well for Milton that he had here no Euripides to mislead him. He understood and

¹ One of the "mechanics" in *Midsummer-Night's Dream*, upon whom Oberon, king of the fairies, had caused an ass's head to be set, and with whom, for spite, he makes his queen, Titania, fall in love.

² A dramatic entertainment in vogue in England at the end of the sixteenth, and beginning of the seventeenth, century, acted by imaginary or allegorical personages. Ben Jonson and Fletcher have left many beautiful examples of the masque.

³ A pastoral drama by John Fletcher (1576-1625). The *Aminta* and *Il Pastor Fido* are poems of the same character, written in Italian, the one by Tasso (1544-95), the other by Guarini (1537-1612).

loved the literature of modern Italy. But he did not feel for it the same veneration which he entertained for the remains of Athenian and Roman poetry, consecrated by so many lofty and endearing recollections. The faults, moreover, of his Italian predecessors were of a kind to which his mind had a deadly antipathy. He could stoop to a plain style, sometimes even to a bald style; but false brilliancy was his utter aversion. His Muse had no objection to a russet attire; but she turned with disgust from the finery of Guarini, as tawdry and as paltry as the rags of a chimney sweeper on May Day. Whatever ornaments she wears are of massive gold, not only dazzling to the sight, but capable of standing the severest test of the crucible.

Milton attended in the "Comus" to the distinction which he afterwards neglected in the "Samson." He made his masque what it ought to be, essentially lyrical, and dramatic only in semblance. He has not attempted a fruitless struggle against a defect inherent in the nature of that species of composition; and he has therefore succeeded, wherever success was not impossible. The speeches must be read as majestic soliloquies; and he who so reads them will be enraptured with their eloquence, their sublimity, and their music. The interruptions of the dialogue, however, impose a constraint upon the writer, and break the illusion of the reader. The finest passages are those which are lyric in form as well as in spirit. "I should much commend," says the excellent Sir Henry Wotton¹ in a letter to Milton, "the tragical part, if the lyrical did not ravish me with a certain Dorique delicacy in your songs and odes, whereunto, I must plainly confess to you, I have seen yet nothing parallel in our language." The criticism was just. It is when Milton escapes from the shackles of the dialogue, when he is discharged from the labor of uniting two incongruous styles, when he is at liberty to indulge his choral raptures without reserve, that he rises even above himself. Then, like his own Good Genius bursting from the earthly form and

¹ An accomplished scholar and poet (1568-1639).

weeds of Thyrsis,¹ he stands forth in celestial freedom and beauty; he seems to cry exultingly,—

“Now my task is smoothly done,
I can fly, or I can run,”²

to skim the earth, to soar above the clouds, to bathe in the elysian³ dew of the rainbow, and to inhale the balmy smells of nard and cassia, which the musky wings of the zephyr scatter through the cedared alleys of the Hesperides.⁴

There are several of the minor poems of Milton on which we would willingly make a few remarks. Still more willingly would we enter into a detailed examination of that admirable poem, the “Paradise Regained,” which, strangely enough, is scarcely ever mentioned except as an instance of the blindness of the parental affection which men of letters bear towards the offspring of their intellects. That Milton was mistaken in preferring this work, excellent as it is, to the “Paradise Lost,” we readily admit. But we are sure that the superiority of the “Paradise Lost” to the “Paradise Regained” is not more decided than the superiority of the “Paradise Regained” to every poem which has since made its appearance. Our limits, however, prevent us from discussing the point at length. We hasten on to that extraordinary production which the general suffrage of critics has placed in the highest class of human compositions.

The only poem of modern times which can be compared with the “Paradise Lost” is the “Divine Comedy.”⁵ The subject

¹ A character in the *Comus*, really a spirit, but disguised as a shepherd.

² *Comus*, lines 1012, 1013.

³ The Elysian Fields were the abode of the blessed spirits in the Hades of the ancient Greeks.

⁴ In Greek mythology, daughters of Hesperus. The garden in which they guarded the golden apples presented to Juno on her marriage with Jupiter was fabled to lie on the extreme verge of the Western ocean.

⁵ The religious poem of Dante (1265–1321), the greatest of the Italian poets. He was born in Florence, from which city he was banished by a political faction, and died in exile.

of Milton, in some points, resembled that of Dante ; but he has treated it in a widely different manner. We cannot, we think, better illustrate our opinion respecting our own great poet, than by contrasting him with the father of Tuscan literature.

The poetry of Milton differs from that of Dante as the hieroglyphics¹ of Egypt differed from the picture writing of Mexico. The images which Dante employs speak for themselves ; they stand simply for what they are. Those of Milton have a signification which is often discernible only to the initiated. Their value depends less on what they directly represent than on what they remotely suggest. However strange, however grotesque, may be the appearance which Dante undertakes to describe, he never shrinks from describing it. He gives us the shape, the color, the sound, the smell, the taste ; he counts the numbers ; he measures the size. His similes are the illustrations of a traveler. Unlike those of other poets, and especially of Milton, they are introduced in a plain, businesslike manner ; not for the sake of any beauty in the objects from which they are drawn ; not for the sake of any ornament which they may impart to the poem ; but simply in order to make the meaning of the writer as clear to the reader as it is to himself. The ruins of the precipice which led from the sixth to the seventh circle of hell were like those of the rock which fell into the Adige² on the south of Trent. The cataract of Phlegethon³ was like that of Aqua Cheta at the monastery of St. Benedict.⁴ The place where the heretics were

¹ Sacred writings or inscriptions on the monuments in Egypt, by means of which their history, civil and religious calendars, deeds, etc., were recorded. In Mexico pictures of animals, plants, etc., instead of signs, were used for the same purpose.

² The Adige is a river of the Tyrol and northern Italy, flowing into the Adriatic, on which the city of Trent is situated.

³ One of the mythical rivers of the infernal regions, whose waves were torrents of fire.

⁴ Founder of the Benedictine Order of monks, and of Western monasticism, born about A.D. 480. His famous monastery was on Monte Cassino, in the vicinity of Naples.

confined in burning tombs resembled the vast cemetery of Arles.¹

Now let us compare with the exact details of Dante the dim intimations of Milton. We will cite a few examples. The English poet has never thought of taking the measure of Satan. He gives us merely a vague idea of vast bulk. In one passage the fiend lies stretched out, huge in length, floating many a rood, equal in size to the earthborn enemies of Jove, or to the sea monster which the mariner mistakes for an island. When he addresses himself to battle against the guardian angels, he stands like Teneriffe² or Atlas:³ his stature reaches the sky. Contrast with these descriptions the lines in which Dante has described the gigantic specter of Nimrod. "His face seemed to me as long and as broad as the ball of St. Peter's at Rome; and his other limbs were in proportion; so that the bank, which concealed him from the waist downwards, nevertheless showed so much of him, that three tall Germans would in vain have attempted to reach to his hair." We are sensible that we do no justice to the admirable style of the Florentine poet. But Mr. Cary's translation is not at hand; and our version, however rude, is sufficient to illustrate our meaning.

Once more, compare the lazar house⁴ in the eleventh book of the "Paradise Lost" with the last ward of Malebolge in Dante. Milton avoids the loathsome details, and takes refuge in indistinct but solemn and tremendous imagery: Despair hurrying from couch to couch to mock the wretches with his attendance; Death shaking his dart over them, but, in spite of supplications,

¹ A town of France, in Provence, in which there is a well-preserved amphitheater, and other remains of Roman occupation.

² A volcano on an island of the same name, off the coast of Africa, 12,200 feet above sea level.

³ A great mountain system in northern Africa, its greatest altitude being 13,000 feet.

⁴ Lazar house (from Lazarus), a public hospital for the reception of victims of contagious or loathsome diseases.

delaying to strike. What says Dante? "There was such a moan there as there would be if all the sick who, between July and September, are in the hospitals of Valdichiana, and of the Tuscan swamps, and of Sardinia, were in one pit together; and such a stench was issuing forth as is wont to issue from decayed limbs."

We will not take upon ourselves the invidious office of settling precedence between two such writers. Each in his own department is incomparable; and each, we may remark, has wisely, or fortunately, taken a subject adapted to exhibit his peculiar talent to the greatest advantage. The "*Divine Comedy*" is a personal narrative. Dante is the eyewitness and earwitness of that which he relates. He is the very man who has heard the tormented spirits crying out for the second death; who has read the dusky characters¹ on the portal within which there is no hope; who has hidden his face from the terrors of the Gorgon;² who has fled from the hooks and the seething pitch of Barbariccia and Draghignazzo. His own hands have grasped the shaggy sides of Lucifer. His own feet have climbed the mountain of expiation. His own brow has been marked by the purifying angel. The reader would throw aside such a tale in incredulous disgust, unless it were told with the strongest air of veracity; with a sobriety even in its horrors; with the greatest precision and multiplicity in its details. The narrative of Milton in this respect differs from that of Dante, as the adventures of Amadis³ differ from those of Gulliver.⁴ The author of "*Amadis*" would

¹ These were the characters: "All hope abandon, ye who enter here."
—DANTE'S *Inferno*, Canto III.

² Known as Medusa; according to Homer, a female monster, one of three sisters, whose head was covered with serpents instead of hair, and with so frightful an aspect that whoever looked on her was changed into stone.

³ The hero of one of the early prose romances of chivalry, Amadis of Gaul, written by a Portuguese gentleman towards the end of the fourteenth century.

⁴ Lemuel Gulliver, whose fictitious travels and adventures in the strange lands of Lilliput, Brobdingnag, etc., were made the vehicle of bitter social and political satire by Dean Swift (1667-1745).

have made his book ridiculous if he had introduced those minute particulars which give such a charm to the work of Swift; the nautical observations, the affected delicacy about names, the official documents transcribed at full length, and all the unmeaning gossip and scandal of the court, springing out of nothing, and tending to nothing. We are not shocked at being told that a man who lived, nobody knows when, saw many very strange sights, and we can easily abandon ourselves to the illusion of the romance. But when Lemuel Gulliver, surgeon, resident at Rotherhithe, tells us of pygmies and giants, flying islands, and philosophizing horses, nothing but such circumstantial touches could produce for a single moment a deception on the imagination.

Of all the poets who have introduced into their works the agency of supernatural beings, Milton has succeeded best. Here Dante decidedly yields to him; and as this is a point on which many rash and ill-considered judgments have been pronounced, we feel inclined to dwell on it a little longer. The most fatal error which a poet can possibly commit in the management of his machinery is that of attempting to philosophize too much. Milton has been often censured for ascribing to spirits many functions of which spirits must be incapable. But these objections, though sanctioned by eminent names, originate, we venture to say, in profound ignorance of the art of poetry.

What is spirit? What are our own minds, the portion of spirit with which we are best acquainted? We observe certain phenomena. We cannot explain them into material causes. We therefore infer that there exists something which is not material. But of this something we have no idea. We can define it only by negatives. We can reason about it only by symbols. We use the word, but we have no image of the thing; and the business of poetry is with images, and not with words. The poet uses words indeed; but they are merely the instruments of his art, not its objects. They are the materials which he is to dispose in such a manner as to present a picture to the mental eye. And

if they are not so disposed, they are no more entitled to be called poetry than a bale of canvas and a box of colors to be called a painting.

Logicians may reason about abstractions. But the great mass of men must have images. The strong tendency of the multitude in all ages and nations to idolatry can be explained on no other principle. The first inhabitants of Greece, there is reason to believe, worshiped one invisible Deity. But the necessity of having something more definite to adore produced, in a few centuries, the innumerable crowd of gods and goddesses. In like manner the ancient Persians¹ thought it impious to exhibit the Creator under a human form. Yet even these transferred to the sun the worship which, in speculation, they considered due only to the Supreme Mind. The history of the Jews is the record of a continued struggle between pure Theism, supported by the most terrible sanctions, and the strangely fascinating desire of having some visible and tangible object of adoration. Perhaps none of the secondary causes which Gibbon² has assigned for the rapidity with which Christianity spread over the world, while Judaism scarcely ever acquired a proselyte, operated more powerfully than this feeling. God, the uncreated, the incomprehensible, the invisible, attracted few worshipers. A philosopher might admire so noble a conception; but the crowd turned away in disgust from words which presented no image to their minds. It was before Deity, embodied in a human form, walking among men, partaking of their infirmities, leaning on their bosoms, weeping over their graves, slumbering in the manger, bleeding on the cross, that the prejudices of the Synagogue,³ and the doubts

¹ The religion of the ancient Persians was a dualistic creed, called Zoroasticism, from its founder, which asserted the existence of two creative spirits, one good, the other evil, but the triumph, ultimately, of the good.

² Edward Gibbon (1737-94), author of the *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.

³ A Greek word, meaning "a place of assembly." The name was given to the Jewish place of worship.

of the Academy,¹ and the pride of the Portico,² and the fasces of the Lictor,³ and the swords of thirty legions, were humbled in the dust. Soon after Christianity had achieved its triumph, the principle which had assisted it began to corrupt it. It became a new paganism. Patron saints assumed the offices of household gods. St. George⁴ took the place of Mars.⁵ St. Elmo⁶ consoled the mariner for the loss of Castor and Pollux. The Virgin Mother and Cecilia⁷ succeeded to Venus⁸ and the Muses.⁹ The fascination of sex and loveliness was again joined to that of celestial dignity; and the homage of chivalry was blended with that of religion. Reformers have often made a stand against these feelings; but never with more than apparent and partial success. The men who demolished the images in cathedrals have not always been able to demolish those which were enshrined in their minds. It would not be difficult to show that in politics the same rule holds good. Doctrines, we are afraid, must generally be embodied before they can excite a strong public feeling. The multitude is more easily interested for the most unmeaning badge, or the most insignificant name, than for the most important principle.

¹ A garden in Athens, so called from Academos, its original owner, where Socrates discoursed and Plato taught.

² The Portico was a painted porch, or *stoa*, in Athens, where Zeno taught his disciples, the Stoics.

³ A public officer in ancient Rome, in attendance upon the chief magistrates to enforce their authority. He carried the *fasces*, a bundle of rods, as emblem of his office.

⁴ The tutelary saint of England, and the especial patron of chivalry.

⁵ The god of war.

⁶ St. Elmo's fire was the name given to the electric light often seen about the masts of ships in stormy weather. The Romans ascribed it to Castor and Pollux, twin divinities of their mythology.

⁷ St. Cecilia, the patroness of music in the church, who suffered martyrdom about A.D. 230.

⁸ The goddess of love.

⁹ The Muses, nine in number, were the goddesses of poetry, music, dancing, painting, etc.

From these considerations, we infer that no poet who should affect that metaphysical accuracy for the want of which Milton has been blamed, would escape a disgraceful failure. Still, however, there was another extreme which, though far less dangerous, was also to be avoided. The imaginations of men are in a great measure under the control of their opinions. The most exquisite art of poetical coloring can produce no illusion when it is employed to represent that which is at once perceived to be incongruous and absurd. Milton wrote in an age of philosophers and theologians. It was necessary, therefore, for him to abstain from giving such a shock to their understandings as might break the charm which it was his object to throw over their imaginations. This is the real explanation of the indistinctness and inconsistency with which he has often been reproached. Dr. Johnson acknowledges that it was absolutely necessary that the spirits should be clothed with material forms. "But," says he, "the poet should have secured the consistency of his system by keeping immateriality out of sight, and seducing the reader to drop it from his thoughts." This is easily said; but what if Milton could not seduce his readers to drop immateriality from their thoughts? What if the contrary opinion had taken so full a possession of the minds of men as to leave no room even for the half belief which poetry requires? Such we suspect to have been the case. It was impossible for the poet to adopt altogether the material or the immaterial system. He therefore took his stand on the debatable ground. He left the whole in ambiguity. He has doubtless, by so doing, laid himself open to the charge of inconsistency. But, though philosophically in the wrong, we cannot but believe that he was poetically in the right. This task, which almost any other writer would have found impracticable, was easy to him. The peculiar art which he possessed of communicating his meaning circuitously through a long succession of associated ideas, and of intimating more than he expressed, enabled him to disguise those incongruities which he could not avoid.

Poetry which relates to the beings of another world ought to be at once mysterious and picturesque. That of Milton is so. That of Dante is picturesque, indeed, beyond any that ever was written. Its effect approaches to that produced by the pencil or the chisel. But it is picturesque to the exclusion of all mystery. This is a fault on the right side, a fault inseparable from the plan of Dante's poem, which, as we have already observed, rendered the utmost accuracy of description necessary. Still it is a fault. The supernatural agents excite an interest; but it is not the interest which is proper to supernatural agents. We feel that we could talk to the ghosts and demons, without any emotion of unearthly awe. We could, like Don Juan,¹ ask them to supper, and eat heartily in their company. Dante's angels are good men with wings. His devils are spiteful, ugly executioners. His dead men are merely living men in strange situations. The scene which passes between the poet and Farinata is justly celebrated. Still, Farinata in the burning tomb is exactly what Farinata would have been at an *auto da fé*.² Nothing can be more touching than the first interview of Dante and Beatrice.³ Yet what is it, but a lovely woman chiding, with sweet, austere composure, the lover for whose affection she is grateful, but whose vices she reprobates? The feelings which give the passage its charm would suit the streets of Florence as well as the summit of the Mount of Purgatory.

The spirits of Milton are unlike those of almost all other writers. His fiends, in particular, are wonderful creations. They are not metaphysical abstractions. They are not wicked

¹ A character in Mozart's opera, Don Giovanni, who invites a statue (of the Commendatore) to sup with him, and is amazed when the statue keeps the appointment.

² "Act of the faith," the name given to the ceremony in use in Spain and Portugal at the execution of heretics by the Inquisition.

³ Beatrice Portinari, whom Dante first met and loved in 1274, when he was but nine years old, and she about the same age, and who, in his Vision, was his guide into Paradise.

men. They are not ugly beasts. They have no horns, no tails, none of the fee-faw-fum of Tasso¹ and Klopstock.² They have just enough in common with human nature to be intelligible to human beings. Their characters are, like their forms, marked by a certain dim resemblance to those of men, but exaggerated to gigantic dimensions, and veiled in mysterious gloom.

Perhaps the gods and demons of Æschylus may best bear a comparison with the angels and devils of Milton. The style of the Athenian had, as we have remarked, something of the Oriental character; and the same peculiarity may be traced in his mythology. It has nothing of the amenity and elegance which we generally find in the superstitions of Greece. All is rugged, barbaric, and colossal. The legends of Æschylus seem to harmonize less with the fragrant groves and graceful porticos in which his countrymen paid their vows to the God of Light³ and Goddess of Desire,⁴ than with those huge and grotesque labyrinths of eternal granite in which Egypt enshrined her mystic Osiris,⁵ or in which Hindostan still bows down to her seven-headed idols. His favorite gods are those of the elder generation, the sons of heaven and earth, compared with whom Jupiter himself was a stripling and an upstart,— the gigantic Titans,⁶ and the inexorable Furies.⁷ Foremost among his creations of this class stands Prometheus,⁸ half fiend, half redeemer, the friend of

¹ An Italian poet (1544–95), who wrote romantic and pastoral poems and dramas, but is chiefly known by his great epic, *Jerusalem Delivered*.

² A German poet (1724–1803), who wrote an epic, *The Messiah*, and dramatic poems on subjects taken from the Old Testament.

³ Apollo.

⁴ Venus.

⁵ The greatest of the Egyptian gods, who judged the dead in the nether world.

⁶ In classical mythology, a race of giants who warred against Jupiter.

⁷ Deities, avengers of crime, who drove guilty souls into the infernal world.

⁸ Prometheus stole fire from heaven for the use and benefit of man, and was chained to the Caucasus Mountains by Jupiter, where an eagle fed upon his liver.

man, the sullen and implacable enemy of heaven. Prometheus bears undoubtedly a considerable resemblance to the Satan of Milton. In both we find the same impatience of control, the same ferocity, the same unconquerable pride. In both characters, also, are mingled, though in very different proportions, some kind and generous feelings. Prometheus, however, is hardly superhuman enough. He talks too much of his chains and his uneasy posture; he is rather too much depressed and agitated. His resolution seems to depend on the knowledge which he possesses that he holds the fate of his torturer in his hands, and that the hour of his release will surely come. But Satan is a creature of another sphere. The might of his intellectual nature is victorious over the extremity of pain. Amidst agonies which cannot be conceived without horror, he deliberates, resolves, and even exults. Against the sword of Michael, against the thunder of Jehovah, against the flaming lake, and the marl burning with solid fire, against the prospect of an eternity of unintermitted misery, his spirit bears up unbroken, resting on its own innate energies, requiring no support from anything external, nor even from hope itself.

To return for a moment to the parallel which we have been attempting to draw between Milton and Dante, we would add that the poetry of these great men has in a considerable degree taken its character from their moral qualities. They are not egotists. They rarely obtrude their idiosyncrasies on their readers. They have nothing in common with those modern beggars for fame, who extort a pittance from the compassion of the inexperienced by exposing the nakedness and sores of their minds. Yet it would be difficult to name two writers whose works have been more completely, though undesignedly, colored by their personal feelings.

The character of Milton was peculiarly distinguished by loftiness of spirit; that of Dante by intensity of feeling. In every line of the "Divine Comedy" we discern the asperity which is produced by pride struggling with misery. There is perhaps

no work in the world so deeply and uniformly sorrowful. The melancholy of Dante was no fantastic caprice. It was not, as far as at this distance of time can be judged, the effect of external circumstances. It was from within. Neither love nor glory, neither the conflicts of earth nor the hope of heaven, could dispel it. It turned every consolation and every pleasure into its own nature. It resembled that noxious Sardinian soil of which the intense bitterness is said to have been perceptible even in its honey. His mind was, in the noble language of the Hebrew poet, "a land of darkness, as darkness itself, and where the light was as darkness." The gloom of his character discolours all the passions of men, and all the face of nature, and tinges with its own livid hue the flowers of Paradise and the glories of the eternal throne. All the portraits of him are singularly characteristic. No person can look on the features, noble even to ruggedness, the dark furrows of the cheek, the haggard and woeful stare of the eye, the sullen and contemptuous curve of the lip, and doubt that they belong to a man too proud and too sensitive to be happy.

Milton was, like Dante, a statesman and a lover; and, like Dante, he had been unfortunate in ambition and in love. He had survived his health and his sight, the comforts of his home, and the prosperity of his party. Of the great men by whom he had been distinguished at his entrance into life, some had been taken away from the evil to come; some had carried into foreign climates their unconquerable hatred of oppression; some were pining in dungeons; and some had poured forth their blood on scaffolds. Venal and licentious scribblers, with just sufficient talent to clothe the thoughts of a pander in the style of a bellman, were now the favorite writers of the sovereign¹ and of the public. It was a loathsome herd, which could be compared to nothing so fitly as to the rabble of "Comus," grotesque monsters, half bestial, half human, dropping with wine, bloated with gluttony, and reeling in obscene dances. Amidst these that fair

¹ Charles II.

Muse was placed, like the chaste lady of the masque, lofty, spotless, and serene, to be chattered at, and pointed at, and grinned at, by the whole rout of satyrs and goblins. If ever despondency and asperity could be excused in any man, they might have been excused in Milton. But the strength of his mind overcame every calamity. Neither blindness, nor gout, nor age, nor penury, nor domestic afflictions, nor political disappointments, nor abuse, nor proscription, nor neglect, had power to disturb his sedate and majestic patience. His spirits do not seem to have been high, but they were singularly equable. His temper was serious, perhaps stern; but it was a temper which no sufferings could render sullen or fretful. Such as it was when, on the eve of great events, he returned from his travels, in the prime of health and manly beauty, loaded with literary distinctions, and glowing with patriotic hopes; such it continued to be when, after having experienced every calamity which is incident to our nature, old, poor, sightless, and disgraced, he retired to his hovel to die.

Hence it was, that, though he wrote the "Paradise Lost" at a time of life when images of beauty and tenderness are in general beginning to fade, even from those minds in which they have not been effaced by anxiety and disappointment, he adorned it with all that is most lovely and delightful in the physical and in the moral world. Neither Theocritus¹ nor Ariosto² had a finer or a more healthful sense of the pleasantness of external objects, or loved better to luxuriate amidst sunbeams and flowers, the songs of nightingales, the juice of summer fruits, and the coolness of shady fountains. His conception of love unites all the voluptuousness of the Oriental harem, and all the gallantry of the chivalric tournament, with all the pure and quiet affection of an English fireside. His poetry reminds us of the miracles of

¹ The greatest of the Greek idyllic and pastoral poets, a Syracusan by birth, who flourished about the end of the third century B.C.

² Ludovico Ariosto (1474-1533), an Italian poet, author of many lyrical poems, and of *Orlando Furioso*, a fantastic story of chivalry.

Alpine scenery. Nooks and dells, beautiful as fairyland, are embosomed in its most rugged and gigantic elevations. The roses and myrtles bloom unchilled on the verge of the avalanche.

Traces, indeed, of the peculiar character of Milton may be found in all his works; but it is most strongly displayed in the Sonnets. Those remarkable poems have been undervalued by critics who have not understood their nature. They have no epigrammatic point. There is none of the ingenuity of Filicaja¹ in the thought, none of the hard and brilliant enamel of Petrarch in the style. They are simple but majestic records of the feelings of the poet; as little tricked out for the public eye as his diary would have been. A victory, an expected attack upon the city, a momentary fit of depression or exultation, a jest thrown out against one of his books, a dream which for a short time restored to him that beautiful face over which the grave had closed forever, led him to musings which, without effort, shaped themselves into verse. The unity of sentiment and severity of style which characterize these little pieces remind us of the Greek Anthology,² or perhaps still more of the Collects³ of the English Liturgy. The noble poem on the Massacres of Piedmont is strictly a collect in verse.

The Sonnets are more or less striking, according as the occasions which gave birth to them are more or less interesting. But they are, almost without exception, dignified by a sobriety and greatness of mind to which we know not where to look for a parallel. It would, indeed, be scarcely safe to draw any decided inferences as to the character of a writer from passages directly egotistical. But the qualities which we have ascribed to Milton,

¹ Filicaja (1642-1707), an Italian lyric poet, who celebrated, in a series of odes, the triumph of the Christians in the defeat of the Turks at Vienna, in 1683.

² A collection of several thousand short poems, among the most valuable remains of ancient Greek literature.

³ A collect is a form of prayer used in the Liturgies, or orders of worship, in the Western churches.

though perhaps most strongly marked in those parts of his works which treat of his personal feelings, are distinguishable in every page, and impart to all his writings, prose and poetry, English, Latin, and Italian, a strong family likeness.

His public conduct was such as was to be expected from a man of a spirit so high and of an intellect so powerful. He lived at one of the most memorable eras in the history of mankind; at the very crisis of the great conflict between Oromasdes and Arimanes,¹ liberty and despotism, reason and prejudice. That great battle was fought for no single generation, for no single land. The destinies of the human race were staked on the same cast with the freedom of the English people. Then were first proclaimed those mighty principles which have since worked their way into the depths of the American forests, which have roused Greece from the slavery and degradation of two thousand years, and which, from one end of Europe to the other, have kindled an unquenchable fire in the hearts of the oppressed, and loosed the knees of the oppressors with an unwonted fear.

Of those principles, then struggling for their infant existence, Milton was the most devoted and eloquent literary champion. We need not say how much we admire his public conduct. But we cannot disguise from ourselves that a large portion of his countrymen still think it unjustifiable. The civil war, indeed, has been more discussed, and is less understood, than any event in English history. The friends of liberty labored under the disadvantage of which the lion in the fable² complained so bitterly. Though they were the conquerors, their enemies were

¹ Oromasdes and Arimanes, the good and evil geniuses of the ancient Persian religion.

² This fable is to the effect that a man and a lion, traveling through a forest, and boasting of their respective strength and prowess, came to a statue of a man strangling a lion, on which the man remarked, "See how strong we are, and how we can prevail over you." To this the king of beasts replied, "Yes, but if the statue had been made by one of us, the man would have been under the lion's paw."

the painters. As a body, the Roundheads¹ had done their utmost to decry and ruin literature; and literature was even with them, as, in the long run, it always is with its enemies. The best book on their side of the question is the charming narrative of Mrs. Hutchinson.² May's "History of the Parliament"³ is good; but it breaks off at the most interesting crisis of the struggle. The performance of Ludlow⁴ is foolish and violent; and most of the later writers who have espoused the same cause, Oldmixon,⁴ for instance, and Catherine Macaulay,⁴ have, to say the least, been more distinguished by zeal than either by candor or by skill. On the other side are the most authoritative and the most popular historical works in our language,—that of Clarendon⁵ and that of Hume.⁶ The former is not only ably written and full of valuable information, but has also an air of dignity and sincerity which makes even the prejudices and errors with which it abounds respectable. Hume, from whose fascinating narrative the great mass of the reading public are still contented to take their opinions, hated religion so much that he hated liberty for having been allied with religion, and has pleaded the cause of tyranny with the dexterity of an advocate, while affecting the impartiality of a judge.

The public conduct of Milton must be approved or condemned, according as the resistance of the people to Charles I.

¹ A name given in derision by the Cavalier or Royalist party in the civil war to the Puritans and Independents.

² Mrs. Hutchinson (1620–59) wrote a memoir of her husband, Colonel Hutchinson, who was in the Parliamentary army in the civil war.

³ May's work, printed in 1647, treats of only a part of the civil war. He was secretary to the Parliament.

⁴ General Ludlow wrote memoirs of Cromwell; John Oldmixon (1673–1742), a History of England (1730–39); and Mrs. Macaulay (1733–91), a history from the reign of James I. to the accession of the House of Hanover.

⁵ Earl of Clarendon (1608–74), a Royalist statesman of the time of Charles I. and Charles II., who wrote a History of the Civil Wars.

⁶ David Hume (1711–76), a famous philosopher, and author of a History of England.

shall appear to be justifiable or criminal. We shall therefore make no apology for dedicating a few pages to the discussion of that interesting and most important question. We shall not argue it on general grounds. We shall not recur to those primary principles from which the claim of any government to the obedience of its subjects is to be deduced. We are entitled to that vantage ground; but we will relinquish it. We are, on this point, so confident of superiority, that we are not unwilling to imitate the ostentatious generosity of those ancient knights who vowed to joust without helmet or shield against all enemies, and to give their antagonists the advantage of sun and wind. We will take the naked constitutional question. We confidently affirm, that every reason which can be urged in favor of the Revolution of 1688¹ may be urged with at least equal force in favor of what is called the Great Rebellion.

In one respect only, we think, can the warmest admirers of Charles venture to say that he was a better sovereign than his son. He was not, in name and profession, a Papist; we say in name and profession, because both Charles himself and his creature Laud,² while they abjured the innocent badges of Popery, retained all its worst vices,—a complete subjection of reason to authority, a weak preference of form to substance, a childish passion for mummeries, an idolatrous veneration for the priestly character, and, above all, a merciless intolerance. This, however, we waive. We will concede that Charles was a good Protestant; but we say that his Protestantism does not make the slightest distinction between his case and that of James.

The principles of the Revolution have often been grossly misrepresented, and never more than in the course of the present year. There is a certain class of men who, while they profess to

¹ The revolution in which James II., brother of Charles II., was driven from the throne by William, Prince of Orange, who succeeded him.

² William Laud, Archbishop of Canterbury, who supported Charles I. in many of his oppressive measures in church matters. He was beheaded on Tower Hill in 1645.

hold in reverence the great names and great actions of former times, never look at them for any other purpose than in order to find in them some excuse for existing abuses. In every venerable precedent they pass by what is essential, and take only what is accidental: they keep out of sight what is beneficial, and hold up to public imitation all that is defective. If, in any part of any great example, there be anything unsound, these flesh flies detect it with an unerring instinct, and dart upon it with a ravenous delight. If some good end has been attained in spite of them, they feel, with their prototype, that their

“Labor must be to pervert that end,
And out of good still to find means of evil.”¹

To the blessings which England has derived from the Revolution these people are utterly insensible. The expulsion of a tyrant, the solemn recognition of popular rights,—liberty, security, toleration,—all go for nothing with them. One sect² there was, which, from unfortunate temporary causes, it was thought necessary to keep under close restraint. One part of the empire³ there was, so unhappily circumstanced that at that time its misery was necessary to our happiness, and its slavery to our freedom. These are the parts of the Revolution which the politicians of whom we speak love to contemplate, and which seem to them not indeed to vindicate, but in some degree to palliate, the good which it has produced. Talk to them of Naples, of Spain, or of South America. They stand forth zealots for the doctrine of Divine Right,⁴ which has now come back to us, like a thief from transportation, under the *alias* of Legitimacy. But mention the miseries of Ireland. Then William⁵ is a hero. Then Somers

¹ *Paradise Lost*, Book I., lines 164, 165.

² The Roman Catholics.

³ “One part of the empire,” i.e., Ireland.

⁴ See Introduction, p. 11.

⁵ William III., Prince of Orange, and King of England after James II. He was the son of Mary, daughter of Charles I.

and Shrewsbury¹ are great men. Then the Revolution is a glorious era! The very same persons who, in this country, never omit an opportunity of reviving every wretched Jacobite² slander respecting the Whigs of that period, have no sooner crossed St. George's Channel³ than they begin to fill their bumpers to the glorious and immortal memory. They may truly boast that they look not at men, but at measures. So that evil be done, they care not who does it; the arbitrary Charles or the liberal William, Ferdinand the Catholic⁴ or Frederick the Protestant.⁵ On such occasions their deadliest opponents may reckon upon their candid construction. The bold assertions of these people have of late impressed a large portion of the public with an opinion that James II. was expelled simply because he was a Catholic, and that the Revolution was essentially a Protestant revolution.

But this certainly was not the case, nor can any person who has acquired more knowledge of the history of those times than is to be found in Goldsmith's⁶ "Abridgment" believe that, if James had held his own religious opinions without wishing to make proselytes, or if, wishing even to make proselytes, he had contented himself with exerting only his constitutional influence for that purpose, the Prince of Orange would ever have been invited over. Our ancestors, we suppose, knew their own meaning; and, if we may believe them, their hostility was primarily not to Popery, but to tyranny. They did not drive out a tyrant

¹ Somers and Shrewsbury were Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State, respectively, in the reign of William III.

² A term applied to the adherents of James II. and his family.

³ Separating England and Ireland.

⁴ King of Spain (1452-1516), who, with his wife Isabella, established the Inquisition.

⁵ Frederick V. (1596-1632), Elector Palatine, one of the Protestant princes of Germany, and son-in-law of King James I. of England.

⁶ Oliver Goldsmith (1728-74), contemporary with Dr. Samuel Johnson, wrote an abridged History of England. He is best known for his poems, *The Traveler* and *The Deserted Village*, and his novel, *The Vicar of Wakefield*.

because he was a Catholic; but they excluded Catholics from the Crown because they thought them likely to be tyrants. The ground on which they, in their famous resolution, declared the throne vacant, was this, "that James had broken the fundamental laws of the kingdom." Every man, therefore, who approves of the Revolution of 1688 must hold that the breach of fundamental laws on the part of the sovereign justifies resistance. The question, then, is this: Had Charles I. broken the fundamental laws of England?

No person can answer in the negative unless he refuses credit, not merely to all the accusations brought against Charles by his opponents, but to the narratives of the warmest Royalists, and to the confessions of the king himself. If there be any truth in any historian of any party who has related the events of that reign, the conduct of Charles, from his accession to the meeting of the Long Parliament,¹ had been a continued course of oppression and treachery. Let those who applaud the Revolution and condemn the Rebellion mention one act of James II. to which a parallel is not to be found in the history of his father. Let them lay their fingers on a single article in the Declaration of Right,² presented by the two Houses to William and Mary, which Charles is not acknowledged to have violated. He had, according to the testimony of his own friends, usurped the functions of the legislature, raised taxes without the consent of Parliament, and quartered troops on the people in the most illegal and vexatious manner. Not a single session of Parliament had passed without some unconstitutional attack on the freedom of debate. The right of petition was grossly violated. Arbitrary judgments,

¹ The Long Parliament was convened in 1640, and so called from its continued existence, except for its suspension by Cromwell in 1653 (when it was known as the "Rump"), until the Restoration in 1660.

An instrument in which the crimes and errors of the government under James II. were recited, with a statement of the rights and privileges of Parliament and the people. On solemn assurance that these would be preserved, William and Mary were constituted joint rulers of Great Britain.

exorbitant fines, and unwarranted imprisonments were grievances of daily occurrence. If these things do not justify resistance, the Revolution was treason; if they do, the great Rebellion was laudable.

But, it is said, why not adopt milder measures? Why, after the king had consented to so many reforms and renounced so many oppressive prerogatives, did the Parliament continue to rise in their demands at the risk of provoking a civil war? The ship money¹ had been given up, the Star Chamber¹ had been abolished, provision had been made for the frequent convocation and secure deliberation of Parliaments. Why not pursue an end confessedly good by peaceable and regular means? We recur again to the analogy of the Revolution. Why was James driven from the throne? Why was he not retained upon conditions? He, too, had offered to call a free Parliament, and to submit to its decision all the matters in dispute. Yet we are in the habit of praising our forefathers, who preferred a revolution, a disputed succession, a dynasty of strangers, twenty years of foreign and intestine war, a standing army, and a national debt, to the rule, however restricted, of a tried and proved tyrant. The Long Parliament acted on the same principle, and is entitled to the same praise. They could not trust the king. He had, no doubt, passed salutary laws; but what assurance was there that he would not break them? He had renounced oppressive prerogatives; but where was the security that he would not resume them? The nation had to deal with a man whom no tie could bind; a man who made and broke promises with equal facility; a man whose honor had been a hundred times pawned, and never redeemed.

Here, indeed, the Long Parliament stands on still stronger ground than the Convention of 1688. No action of James can be compared to the conduct of Charles with respect to the Petition of Right.¹ The Lords and Commons present him with a

¹ See Introduction, p. 12.

bill in which the constitutional limits of his power are marked out. He hesitates; he evades; at last he bargains to give his assent for five subsidies. The bill receives his solemn assent; the subsidies are voted; but no sooner is the tyrant relieved than he returns at once to all the arbitrary measures which he had bound himself to abandon, and violates all the clauses of the very act which he had been paid to pass.

For more than ten years the people had seen the rights which were theirs by a double claim,—by immemorial inheritance and by recent purchase,—infringed by the perfidious king who had recognized them. At length circumstances compelled Charles to summon another Parliament. Another chance was given to our fathers: were they to throw it away as they had thrown away the former? Were they again to be cozened by *le Roi le veut?*¹ Were they again to advance their money on pledges which had been forfeited over and over again? Were they to lay a second Petition of Right at the foot of the throne, to grant another lavish aid in exchange for another unmeaning ceremony, and then to take their departure, till, after ten years more of fraud and oppression, their prince should again require a supply, and again repay it with a perjury? They were compelled to choose whether they would trust a tyrant or conquer him. We think that they chose wisely and nobly.

The advocates of Charles, like the advocates of other malefactors against whom overwhelming evidence is produced, generally decline all controversy about the facts, and content themselves with calling testimony to character. He had so many private virtues! And had James II. no private virtues? Was Oliver Cromwell, his bitterest enemies themselves being judges, destitute of private virtues? And what, after all, are the virtues ascribed to Charles? A religious zeal, not more sincere than that of his son, and fully as weak and narrow-minded, and a few

¹ "The king wishes it," a phrase in which the royal assent to bills in Parliament is conveyed. It dates from the time when French was the language of the court.

of the ordinary household decencies which half the tombstones in England claim for those who lie beneath them. A good father! A good husband! Ample apologies indeed for fifteen years of persecution, tyranny, and falsehood!

We charge him with having broken his coronation oath; and we are told that he kept his marriage vow! We accuse him of having given up his people to the merciless inflictions of the most hot-headed and hard-hearted of prelates; and the defense is that he took his little son on his knee, and kissed him! We censure him for having violated the articles of the Petition of Right, after having, for good and valuable consideration, promised to observe them; and we are informed that he was accustomed to hear prayers at six o'clock in the morning! It is to such considerations as these, together with his Vandyke¹ dress, his handsome face, and his peaked beard, that he owes, we verily believe, most of his popularity with the present generation.

For ourselves, we own that we do not understand the common phrase, "a good man, but a bad king." We can as easily conceive a good man and an unnatural father, or a good man and a treacherous friend. We cannot, in estimating the character of an individual, leave out of our consideration his conduct in the most important of all human relations; and if in that relation we find him to have been selfish, cruel, and deceitful, we shall take the liberty to call him a bad man, in spite of all his temperance at table, and all his regularity at chapel.

We cannot refrain from adding a few words respecting a topic on which the defenders of Charles are fond of dwelling. If, they say, he governed his people ill, he at least governed them after the example of his predecessors. If he violated their privileges, it was because those privileges had not been accurately defined. No act of oppression has ever been imputed to him

¹ Properly spelled Van Dyck, — a distinguished portrait painter (1599–1641). He was born at Antwerp, but lived for most of his life in England, where he painted portraits of many of the historical characters of Charles's court.

which has not a parallel in the annals of the Tudors.¹ This point Hume has labored, with an art which is as discreditable in a historical work as it would be admirable in a forensic address. The answer is short, clear, and decisive. Charles had assented to the Petition of Right. He had renounced the oppressive powers said to have been exercised by his predecessors, and he had renounced them for money. He was not entitled to set up his antiquated claims against his own recent release.

These arguments are so obvious that it may seem superfluous to dwell upon them; but those who have observed how much the events of that time are misrepresented and misunderstood, will not blame us for stating the case simply. It is a case of which the simplest statement is the strongest.

The enemies of the Parliament, indeed, rarely choose to take issue on the great points of the question. They content themselves with exposing some of the crimes and follies to which public commotions necessarily give birth. They bewail the unmerited fate of Strafford.² They execrate the lawless violence of the army. They laugh at the scriptural names of the preachers. Major generals fleecing their districts; soldiers reveling on the spoils of a ruined peasantry; upstarts, enriched by the public plunder, taking possession of the hospitable firesides and hereditary trees of the old gentry; boys smashing the beautiful windows of cathedrals; Quakers³ riding naked through the market place; Fifth-monarchy men⁴ shouting for King Jesus; agitators

¹ A dynasty of English rulers, beginning with Henry VII., and occupying the throne until succeeded by the Stuarts, Queen Elizabeth being the last Tudor sovereign.

² Thomas Wentworth, Earl of Strafford (1593-1641), a leading member at first of the opposition in Parliament to Charles I. He subsequently joined the king's party, and became his chief counselor and adviser in all his acts of usurpation and tyranny. He was executed on Tower Hill in 1641.

³ A religious society originally known as Friends, founded by George Fox about 1648. The name Quaker was afterwards applied to them in contempt.

⁴ Fifth-monarchy men were sectaries who believed that they were to

lecturing from the tops of tubs on the fate of Agag ; — all these, they tell us, were the offspring of the Great Rebellion.

Be it so. We are not careful to answer in this matter. These charges, were they infinitely more important, would not alter our opinion of an event which alone has made us to differ from the slaves who crouch beneath despotic scepters. Many evils, no doubt, were produced by the civil war. They were the price of our liberty. Has the acquisition been worth the sacrifice ? It is the nature of the devil of tyranny to tear and rend the body which he leaves. Are the miseries of continued possession less horrible than the struggles of the tremendous exorcism ?

If it were possible that a people brought up under an intolerant and arbitrary system could subvert that system without acts of cruelty and folly, half the objections to despotic power would be removed. We should, in that case, be compelled to acknowledge that it at least produces no pernicious effects on the intellectual and moral character of a nation. We deplore the outrages which accompany revolutions. But the more violent the outrages, the more assured we feel that a revolution was necessary. The violence of those outrages will always be proportioned to the ferocity and ignorance of the people, and the ferocity and ignorance of the people will be proportioned to the oppression and degradation under which they have been accustomed to live. Thus it was in our civil war. The heads of the Church and State reaped only that which they had sown. The government had prohibited free discussion ; it had done its best to keep the people unacquainted with their duties and their rights. The retribution was just and natural. If our rulers suffered from popular ignorance, it was because they had themselves taken away the key of knowledge. If they were assailed with blind fury, it was because they had exacted an equally blind submission.

It is the character of such revolutions that we always see the prepare the way for the reign on earth of Christ and his saints, which was to form the fifth monarchy, after the Assyrian, Persian, Greek, and Roman.

worst of them at first. Till men have been some time free, they know not how to use their freedom. The natives of wine countries are generally sober. In climates where wine is a rarity intemperance abounds. A newly liberated people may be compared to a northern army encamped on the Rhine or the Xeres.¹ It is said that, when soldiers in such a situation first find themselves able to indulge without restraint in such a rare and expensive luxury, nothing is to be seen but intoxication. Soon, however, plenty teaches discretion, and, after wine has been for a few months their daily fare, they become more temperate than they had ever been in their own country. In the same manner, the final and permanent fruits of liberty are wisdom, moderation, and mercy. Its immediate effects are often atrocious crimes, conflicting errors, skepticism on points the most clear, dogmatism on points the most mysterious. It is just at this crisis that its enemies love to exhibit it. They pull down the scaffolding from the half-finished edifice; they point to the flying dust, the falling bricks, the comfortless rooms, the frightful irregularity of the whole appearance; and then ask in scorn where the promised splendor and comfort is to be found. If such miserable sophisms were to prevail there would never be a good house or a good government in the world.

Ariosto tells a pretty story² of a fairy, who, by some mysterious law of her nature, was condemned to appear at certain seasons in the form of a foul and poisonous snake. Those who injured her during the period of her disguise were forever excluded from participation in the blessings which she bestowed. But to those who, in spite of her loathsome aspect, pitied and protected her, she afterwards revealed herself in the beautiful and celestial form which was natural to her; accompanied their steps, granted all their wishes, filled their houses with wealth, made them happy in love and victorious in war. Such a spirit is Liberty. At times

¹ A city (not a river) of Spain, famous for the production of sherry wine, which takes its name from that of the place.

² In his poem, *Orlando Furioso*, Canto XLIII.

she takes the form of a hateful reptile. She grovels, she hisses, she stings. But woe to those who in disgust shall venture to crush her! And happy are those who, having dared to receive her in her degraded and frightful shape, shall at length be rewarded by her in the time of her beauty and her glory!

There is only one cure for the evils which newly acquired freedom produces; and that cure is freedom. When a prisoner first leaves his cell he cannot bear the light of day; he is unable to discriminate colors, or recognize faces. But the remedy is, not to remand him into his dungeon, but to accustom him to the rays of the sun. The blaze of truth and liberty may at first dazzle and bewilder nations which have become half blind in the house of bondage. But let them gaze on, and they will soon be able to bear it. In a few years men learn to reason. The extreme violence of opinions subsides. Hostile theories correct each other. The scattered elements of truth cease to contend, and begin to coalesce. And at length a system of justice and order is educed out of the chaos.

Many politicians of our time are in the habit of laying it down as a self-evident proposition, that no people ought to be free till they are fit to use their freedom. The maxim is worthy of the fool in the old story, who resolved not to go into the water till he had learned to swim. If men are to wait for liberty till they become wise and good in slavery, they may indeed wait forever.

Therefore it is that we decidedly approve of the conduct of Milton and the other wise and good men who, in spite of much that was ridiculous and hateful in the conduct of their associates, stood firmly by the cause of public liberty. We are not aware that the poet has been charged with personal participation in any of the blamable excesses of that time. The favorite topic of his enemies is the line of conduct which he pursued with regard to the execution of the king. Of that celebrated proceeding we by no means approve. Still we must say, in justice to the many eminent persons who concurred in it, and in justice more particularly to the eminent person who defended it, that nothing can

be more absurd than the imputations which, for the last hundred and sixty years, it has been the fashion to cast upon the Regicides.¹ We have, throughout, abstained from appealing to first principles. We will not appeal to them now. We recur again to the parallel case of the Revolution. What essential distinction can be drawn between the execution of the father and the deposition of the son? What constitutional maxim is there which applies to the former and not to the latter? The king can do no wrong. If so, James was as innocent as Charles could have been. The minister, only, ought to be responsible for the acts of the sovereign. If so, why not impeach Jeffreys² and retain James? The person of a king is sacred. Was the person of James considered sacred at the Boyne?³ To discharge cannon against an army in which a king is known to be posted is to approach pretty near to regicide. Charles, too, it should always be remembered, was put to death by men who had been exasperated by the hostilities of several years, and who had never been bound to him by any other tie than that which was common to them with all their fellow-citizens. Those who drove James from his throne, who seduced his army, who alienated his friends, who first imprisoned him in his palace, and then turned him out of it, who broke in upon his very slumbers by imperious messages, who pursued him with fire and sword from one part of the empire to another, who hanged, drew, and quartered his adherents, and attainted his innocent heir, were his nephew⁴ and his two daughters.⁵ When we reflect on all these things, we are

¹ The men, sixty-seven in number, who sat in trial upon Charles I. and signed his death warrant. Many of them were executed after the Restoration.

² A brutal chief justice in the reigns of Charles II. and James II., who presided at the "Bloody Assizes," and condemned over three hundred persons to death.

³ A river of Ireland, on the banks of which was fought, July 1, 1690, the battle in which William III. defeated the exiled James II.

⁴ William III.

⁵ Mary, William's wife, and Anne, queen after William's death.

at a loss to conceive how the same persons who, on the 5th of November,¹ thank God for wonderfully conducting his servant William, and for making all opposition fall before him until he became our king and governor, can, on the 30th of January,² contrive to be afraid that the blood of the Royal Martyr may be visited on themselves and their children.

We disapprove, we repeat, of the execution of Charles; not because the constitution exempts the king from responsibility, for we know that all such maxims, however excellent, have their exceptions; nor because we feel any peculiar interest in his character, for we think that his sentence describes him with perfect justice as "a tyrant, a traitor, a murderer, and a public enemy;" but because we are convinced that the measure was most injurious to the cause of freedom. He whom it removed was a captive and a hostage; his heir, to whom the allegiance of every Royalist was instantly transferred, was at large. The Presbyterians could never have been perfectly reconciled to the father; they had no such rooted enmity to the son. The great body of the people, also, contemplated that proceeding with feelings which, however unreasonable, no government could safely venture to outrage.

But though we think the conduct of the Regicides blamable, that of Milton appears to us in a very different light. The deed was done. It could not be undone. The evil was incurred; and the object was to render it as small as possible. We censure the chiefs of the army for not yielding to the popular opinion; but we cannot censure Milton for wishing to change that opinion. The very feeling which would have restrained us from committing the act would have led us, after it had been committed, to defend it against the ravings of servility and superstition. For the sake of public liberty we wish that the thing had not been done while the people disapproved of it. But, for the sake of

¹ The day of William's landing in England, 1688.

² The day of the execution of Charles I., 1649.

public liberty, we should also have wished the people to approve of it when it was done. If anything more were wanting to the justification of Milton, the book of Salmasius¹ would furnish it. That miserable performance is now with justice considered only as a beacon to word-catchers who wish to become statesmen. The celebrity of the man who refuted it, the "*Æneæ magni dextra*,"² gives it all its fame with the present generation. In that age the state of things was different. It was not then fully understood how vast an interval separates the mere classical scholar from the political philosopher. Nor can it be doubted that a treatise which, bearing the name of so eminent a critic, attacked the fundamental principles of all free governments, must, if suffered to remain unanswered, have produced a most pernicious effect on the public mind.

We wish to add a few words relative to another subject, on which the enemies of Milton delight to dwell,—his conduct during the administration of the Protector.³ That an enthusiastic votary of liberty should accept office under a military usurper seems, no doubt, at first sight, extraordinary. But all the circumstances in which the country was then placed were extraordinary. The ambition of Oliver was of no vulgar kind. He never seems to have coveted despotic power. He at first fought sincerely and manfully for the Parliament, and never deserted it till it had deserted its duty. If he dissolved it by force, it was not till he found that the few members who remained after so many deaths, secessions, and expulsions, were desirous to appropriate to themselves a power which they held only in trust, and to inflict upon England the curse of a Venetian oligarchy.⁴ But even when thus placed by violence at the head of affairs, he did not assume

¹ See Introduction, p. 16.

² "*Æneæ magni dextra (cadis)*," thou fallest by the right hand of the great Æneas. Virgil's *Æneid*, Book X., line 830.

³ The title assumed by Oliver Cromwell with his supreme power in the government of the Commonwealth.

⁴ An oligarchy is a government by a few; an aristocracy.

unlimited power. He gave the country a constitution far more perfect than any which had at that time been known in the world. He reformed the representative system in a manner which has extorted praise even from Lord Clarendon. For himself he demanded, indeed, the first place in the Commonwealth; but with powers scarcely so great as those of a Dutch stadtholder¹ or an American president. He gave the Parliament a voice in the appointment of ministers, and left to it the whole legislative authority, not even reserving to himself a veto on its enactments; and he did not require that the chief magistracy should be hereditary in his family. Thus far, we think, if the circumstances of the time and the opportunities which he had of aggrandizing himself be fairly considered, he will not lose by comparison with Washington² or Bolivar.³ Had his moderation been met by corresponding moderation, there is no reason to think that he would have overstepped the line which he had traced for himself. But when he found that his Parliaments questioned the authority under which they met, and that he was in danger of being deprived of the restricted power which was absolutely necessary to his personal safety, then it must be acknowledged he adopted a more arbitrary policy.

Yet, though we believe that the intentions of Cromwell were at first honest, though we believe that he was driven from the noble course which he had marked out for himself by the almost irresistible force of circumstances, though we admire, in common with all men of all parties, the ability and energy of his splendid administration, we are not pleading for arbitrary and lawless power, even in his hands. We know that a good constitution is infinitely better than the best despot. But we suspect, that at

¹ English form of the Dutch *stadhouder*, a title given to the governor of a province in Holland.

² George Washington (1732-99), the first President of the United States of America.

³ A South American patriot called "The Liberator," for having put an end to Spanish rule in that country.

the time of which we speak, the violence of religious and political enmities rendered a stable and happy settlement next to impossible. The choice lay, not between Cromwell and liberty, but between Cromwell and the Stuarts. That Milton chose well no man can doubt who fairly compares the events of the Protectorate with those of the thirty years which succeeded it, the darkest and most disgraceful in the English annals. Cromwell was evidently laying, though in an irregular manner, the foundations of an admirable system. Never before had religious liberty and the freedom of discussion been enjoyed in a greater degree. Never had the national honor been better upheld abroad, or the seat of justice better filled at home. And it was rarely that any opposition which stopped short of open rebellion provoked the resentment of the liberal and magnanimous usurper. The institutions which he had established, as set down in the Instrument of Government and the Humble Petition and Advice, were excellent. His practice, it is true, too often departed from the theory of these institutions. But had he lived a few years longer, it is probable that his institutions would have survived him, and that his arbitrary practice would have died with him. His power had not been consecrated by ancient prejudices. It was upheld only by his great personal qualities. Little, therefore, was to be dreaded from a second Protector, unless he were also a second Oliver Cromwell. The events which followed his decease are the most complete vindication of those who exerted themselves to uphold his authority. His death dissolved the whole frame of society. The army rose against the Parliament, the different corps of the army against each other. Sect raved against sect. Party plotted against party. The Presbyterians, in their eagerness to be revenged on the Independents,¹ sacrificed their own liberty, and deserted all their old principles. Without casting one glance on the past, or requiring one stipulation for the future,

¹ Seceders from the Presbyterian body, who composed the greater part of the Parliamentary army.

they threw down their freedom at the feet of the most frivolous and heartless of tyrants.

Then came those days, never to be recalled without a blush, the days of servitude without loyalty, and sensuality without love; of dwarfish talents and gigantic vices; the paradise of cold hearts and narrow minds; the golden age of the coward, the bigot, and the slave. The king cringed to his rival that he might trample on his people, sank into a viceroy of France, and pocketed with complacent infamy her degrading insults and her more degrading gold. The caresses of harlots and the jests of buffoons regulated the policy of the state. The government had just ability enough to deceive, and just religion enough to persecute. The principles of liberty were the scoff of every grinning courtier, and the Anathema Maranatha¹ of every fawning dean. In every high place, worship was paid to Charles and James, Belial² and Moloch;³ and England propitiated those obscene and cruel idols with the blood of her best and bravest children. Crime succeeded to crime, and disgrace to disgrace, till the race, accursed of God and man, was a second time driven forth, to wander on the face of the earth, and to be a byword and a shaking of the head to the nations.

Most of the remarks which we have hitherto made on the public character of Milton apply to him only as one of a large body. We shall proceed to notice some of the peculiarities which distinguished him from his contemporaries. And for that purpose it is necessary to take a short survey of the parties into which the political world was at that time divided. We must

¹ "Anathema Maranatha," i.e., a form of denunciation, as in 1 Cor. xvi. 22. Anathema is Greek for "curse;" maranatha, a Syriac word, signifying "the Lord will come."

² A Hebrew word often used by translators of the Bible as a proper name, but really an abstract term meaning "worthlessness," and hence "wickedness."

³ Worshiped as a deity with cruel rites among the Ammonites in the days of Solomon, and at a later date among the Jews.

premise that our observations are intended to apply only to those who adhered, from a sincere preference, to one or to the other side. In days of public commotion every faction, like an Oriental army, is attended by a crowd of camp followers, a useless and heartless rabble, who prowl round its line of march in the hope of picking up something under its protection, but desert it in the day of battle, and often join to exterminate it after a defeat. England, at the time of which we are treating, abounded with fickle and selfish politicians, who transferred their support to every government as it rose; who kissed the hand of the king in 1640, and spat in his face in 1649; who shouted with equal glee when Cromwell was inaugurated in Westminster Hall, and when he was dug up to be hanged at Tyburn; who dined on calves' heads, or stuck up oak branches, as circumstances altered, without the slightest shame or repugnance. These we leave out of the account. We take our estimate of parties from those who really deserve to be called partisans.

We would speak first of the Puritans, the most remarkable body of men, perhaps, which the world has ever produced. The odious and ridiculous parts of their character lie on the surface. He that runs may read them; nor have there been wanting attentive and malicious observers to point them out. For many years after the Restoration they were the theme of unmeasured invective and derision. They were exposed to the utmost licentiousness of the press and of the stage, at the time when the press and the stage were most licentious. They were not men of letters; they were, as a body, unpopular; they could not defend themselves; and the public would not take them under its protection. They were therefore abandoned, without reserve, to the tender mercies of the satirists and dramatists. The ostentatious simplicity of their dress, their sour aspect, their nasal twang, their stiff posture, their long graces, their Hebrew names, the scriptural phrases which they introduced on every occasion, their contempt of human learning, their detestation of polite amusements, were indeed fair game for the laughers. But it is not from the laugh-

ers alone that the philosophy of history is to be learned. And he who approaches this subject should carefully guard against the influence of that potent ridicule which has already misled so many excellent writers.

“Ecco il fonte del riso, ed ecco il rio
 Che mortali perigli in se contiene :
 Hor qui tener a fren nostro desio,
 Ed esser cauti molto a noi conviene.”¹

Those who roused the people to resistance ; who directed their measures through a long series of eventful years ; who formed, out of the most unpromising materials, the finest army that Europe had ever seen ; who trampled down king, church, and aristocracy ; who, in the short intervals of domestic sedition and rebellion, made the name of England terrible to every nation on the face of the earth,—were no vulgar fanatics. Most of their absurdities were mere external badges, like the signs of freemasonry, or the dresses of friars. We regret that these badges were not more attractive. We regret that a body to whose courage and talents mankind has owed inestimable obligations, had not the lofty elegance which distinguished some of the adherents of Charles I., or the easy good breeding for which the court of Charles II. was celebrated. But, if we must make our choice, we shall, like Bassanio² in the play, turn from the specious

¹ “ This is the source of laughter and this the stream
 Which contains mortal perils in itself :
 Now here to hold in check our desire,
 And to be very cautious, becomes us.”

² In Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, Portia, in accordance with her father's will, was to take for her husband that one of her suitors who should select from among three caskets, of gold, silver, and lead respectively, the one in which her portrait had been placed. Bassanio, in choosing the leaden casket, became possessed of the portrait and the lady, the two other suitors selecting the gold and silver caskets, in which respectively a death's-head and a fool's head were found.

caskets which contain only the death's-head and the fool's head, and fix on the plain leaden chest which conceals the treasure.

The Puritans were men whose minds had derived a peculiar character from the daily contemplation of superior beings and eternal interests. Not content with acknowledging, in general terms, an overruling Providence, they habitually ascribed every event to the will of the Great Being, for whose power nothing was too vast, for whose inspection nothing was too minute. To know Him, to serve Him, to enjoy Him, was with them the great end of existence. They rejected with contempt the ceremonious homage which other sects substituted for the pure worship of the soul. Instead of catching occasional glimpses of the Deity through an obscuring veil, they aspired to gaze full on the intolerable brightness, and to commune with Him face to face. Hence originated their contempt for terrestrial distinctions. The difference between the greatest and the meanest of mankind seemed to vanish, when compared with the boundless interval which separated the whole race from Him on whom their own eyes were constantly fixed. They recognized no title to superiority but His favor; and, confident of that favor, they despised all the accomplishments and all the dignities of the world. If they were unacquainted with the works of philosophers and poets, they were deeply read in the oracles of God. If their names were not found in the registers of heralds, they were recorded in the Book of Life. If their steps were not accompanied by a splendid train of menials, legions of ministering angels had charge over them. Their palaces were houses not made with hands; their diadems, crowns of glory which should never fade away. On the rich and the eloquent, on nobles and priests, they looked down with contempt; for they esteemed themselves rich in a more precious treasure, and eloquent in a more sublime language, nobles by the right of an earlier creation, and priests by the imposition of a mightier hand. The very meanest of them was a being to whose fate a mysterious and terrible importance belonged, on whose slightest action the spirits of light and

darkness looked with anxious interest; who had been destined, before heaven and earth were created, to enjoy a felicity which should continue when heaven and earth should have passed away. Events which shortsighted politicians ascribed to earthly causes had been ordained on his account. For his sake empires had risen, and flourished, and decayed. For his sake the Almighty had proclaimed His will by the pen of the Evangelist and the harp of the prophet. He had been wrested by no common deliverer from the grasp of no common foe. He had been ransomed by the sweat of no vulgar agony, by the blood of no earthly sacrifice. It was for him that the sun had been darkened, that the rocks had been rent, that the dead had risen, that all nature had shuddered at the sufferings of her expiring God.

Thus the Puritan was made up of two different men: the one all self-abasement, penitence, gratitude, passion; the other proud, calm, inflexible, sagacious. He prostrated himself in the dust before his Maker; but he set his foot on the neck of his king. In his devotional retirement, he prayed with convulsions, and groans, and tears. He was half maddened by glorious or terrible illusions. He heard the lyres of angels or the tempting whispers of fiends. He caught a gleam of the Beatific Vision, or woke screaming from dreams of everlasting fire. Like Vane,¹ he thought himself intrusted with the scepter of the millennial² year. Like Fleetwood,³ he cried in the bitterness of his soul that God had hid his face from him. But when he took his seat in the council, or girt on his sword for war, these tempestuous

¹ Sir Henry Vane (1612-62), identified with the Puritan cause, was governor of Massachusetts in 1636, and on his return to England in 1637 was active in opposition to the Royalist party. He was beheaded on Tower Hill in 1662.

² Millennium means a thousand years, and refers to a period during which the Messiah, as the prophecies are interpreted, will reign in person on the earth.

³ Son-in-law of Oliver Cromwell, and a general in the Parliamentary army.

workings of the soul had left no perceptible trace behind them. People who saw nothing of the godly but their uncouth visages, and heard nothing from them but their groans and their whining hymns, might laugh at them. But those had little reason to laugh who encountered them in the hall of debate or in the field of battle. These fanatics brought to civil and military affairs a coolness of judgment and an immutability of purpose which some writers have thought inconsistent with their religious zeal, but which were in fact the necessary effects of it. The intensity of their feelings on one subject made them tranquil on every other. One overpowering sentiment had subjected to itself pity and hatred, ambition and fear. Death had lost its terrors and pleasure its charms. They had their smiles and their tears, their raptures and their sorrows, but not for the things of this world. Enthusiasm had made them Stoics,¹ had cleared their minds from every vulgar passion and prejudice, and raised them above the influence of danger and of corruption. It sometimes might lead them to pursue unwise ends, but never to choose unwise means. They went through the world, like Sir Artegal's iron man Talus² with his flail, crushing and trampling down oppressors, mingling with human beings, but having neither part nor lot in human infirmities; insensible to fatigue, to pleasure, and to pain; not to be pierced by any weapon, not to be withstood by any barrier.

Such we believe to have been the character of the Puritans. We perceive the absurdity of their manners. We dislike the sullen gloom of their domestic habits. We acknowledge that the tone of their minds was often injured by straining after things too high for mortal reach; and we know that, in spite of their hatred of Popery, they too often fell into the worst vices of that bad system,—intolerance and extravagant austerity; that they

¹ The Stoic philosophers held that we should lead a passionless life, indifferent to any sensations of either pleasure or pain.

² An "iron man" (representing power), in the Fifth Book of Spenser's *Faery Queene*, follows Sir Artegal, who personates justice, with an iron flail, "with which he thrashed out falsehood and did truth unfold."

had their anchorites and their crusades,¹ their Dunstons² and their De Montforts,³ their Dominics⁴ and their Escobars.⁵ Yet, when all circumstances are taken into consideration, we do not hesitate to pronounce them a brave, a wise, an honest, and a useful body.

The Puritans espoused the cause of civil liberty mainly because it was the cause of religion. There was another party, by no means numerous, but distinguished by learning and ability, which acted with them on very different principles. We speak of those whom Cromwell was accustomed to call the Heathens, men who were, in the phraseology of that time, doubting Thomases⁶ or careless Gallios⁷ with regard to religious subjects, but passionate worshipers of freedom. Heated by the study of ancient literature, they set up their country as their idol, and proposed to themselves the heroes of Plutarch⁸ as their examples. They seem to have borne some resemblance to the Brissotines⁹ of the French Revolution. But it is not very easy to draw the line of distinction between them and their devout associates, whose tone and manner they sometimes found it convenient to affect, and sometimes, it is probable, imperceptibly adopted.

¹ The name given to the religious wars waged in Palestine against the Mohammedans by the Christian natives of Europe in the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries, for the possession of the Holy Sepulcher.

² St. Dunstan, Archbishop of Canterbury in England in the tenth century, who made the Anglo-Saxon Church subject to that of Rome.

³ De Montfort (1150–1226) was a French nobleman notorious for his terrible persecution of the Albigenses, a religious sect in the south of France, which had seceded from the Roman Church.

⁴ Dominic, founder of the order of Black Friars or Dominicans, was De Montfort's associate in these cruelties.

⁵ Escobar (1589–1669), a Spanish Jesuit, was a writer on casuistry, which treats of delicate questions of conscience and morals.

⁶ John xx. 24, 25.

⁷ Acts xviii. 17.

⁸ A Greek writer, author of parallel Lives of the most famous Greeks and Romans. He lived in the first century of the Christian era.

⁹ The Girondists in the French Revolution, who favored the Republic, but were opposed to its excesses: so called from their leader, Jean Pierre Brissot.

We now come to the Royalists. We shall attempt to speak of them, as we have spoken of their antagonists, with perfect candor. We shall not charge upon a whole party the profligacy and baseness of the horse boys, gamblers, and bravoës, whom the hope of license and plunder attracted from all the dens of White-friars to the standard of Charles, and who disgraced their associates by excesses which, under the stricter discipline of the parliamentary armies, were never tolerated. We will select a more favorable specimen. Thinking as we do that the cause of the king was the cause of bigotry and tyranny, we yet cannot refrain from looking with complacency on the character of the honest old Cavaliers. We feel a national pride in comparing them with the instruments which the despots of other countries are compelled to employ; with the mutes who throng their antechambers, and the Janissaries¹ who mount guard at their gates. Our Royalist countrymen were not heartless, dangling courtiers, bowing at every step, and simpering at every word. They were not mere machines for destruction, dressed up in uniforms, caned into skill, intoxicated into valor, defending without love, destroying without hatred. There was a freedom in their subserviency, a nobleness in their very degradation. The sentiment of individual independence was strong within them. They were indeed misled, but by no base or selfish motive. Compassion and romantic honor, the prejudices of childhood, and the venerable names of history, threw over them a spell potent as that of Duessa;² and, like the Red Cross Knight, they thought that they were doing battle for an injured beauty, while they defended a false and loathsome sorceress. In truth, they scarcely entered at all into the merits of the political question. It was not for a

¹ A celebrated body of Turkish troops, composed mostly of Christian youths captured in war and trained in military discipline. They were so called from *Yeni-tsheri*, meaning "new soldiers."

² A sorceress (typifying falsehood), in the First Book of Spenser's Faery Queene, who in the guise of Una (representing truth and purity) deceives for a time her champion, the Red Cross Knight.

treacherous king or an intolerant church that they fought, but for the old banner which had waved in so many battles over the heads of their fathers, and for the altars at which they had received the hands of their brides. Though nothing could be more erroneous than their political opinions, they possessed, in a far greater degree than their adversaries, those qualities which are the grace of private life. With many of the vices of the Round Table,¹ they had also many of its virtues,—courtesy, generosity, veracity, tenderness, and respect for women. They had far more both of profound and of polite learning than the Puritans. Their manners were more engaging, their tempers more amiable, their tastes more elegant, and their households more cheerful.

Milton did not strictly belong to any of the classes which we have described. He was not a Puritan. He was not a free-thinker. He was not a Royalist. In his character the noblest qualities of every party were combined in harmonious union. From the Parliament and from the court, from the conventicle² and from the Gothic cloister,³ from the gloomy and sepulchral circles of the Roundheads, and from the Christmas revel of the hospitable Cavalier, his nature selected and drew to itself whatever was great and good, while it rejected all the base and pernicious ingredients by which those finer elements were defiled. Like the Puritans, he lived

As ever in his great Taskmaster's eye.⁴

Like them, he kept his mind continually fixed on an Almighty Judge and an eternal reward. And hence he acquired their contempt of external circumstances, their fortitude, their tranquillity,

¹ The mythical table of King Arthur and his knights.

² Originally meaning a cabal among the monks of a monastery, was given as a term of reproach to meetings of English or Scotch Nonconformists.

³ The cloister was an arcade around the open courts of monasteries and cathedrals, usually built in the Gothic style of architecture.

⁴ See Milton's Sonnet on his Twenty-third Birthday.

their inflexible resolution. But not the coolest skeptic or the most profane scoffer was more perfectly free from the contagion of their frantic delusions, their savage manners, their ludicrous jargon, their scorn of science, and their aversion to pleasure. Hating tyranny with a perfect hatred, he had nevertheless all the estimable and ornamental qualities which were almost entirely monopolized by the party of the tyrant. There was none who had a stronger sense of the value of literature, a finer relish for every elegant amusement, or a more chivalrous delicacy of honor and love. Though his opinions were democratic, his tastes and his associations were such as harmonize best with monarchy and aristocracy. He was under the influence of all the feelings by which the gallant Cavaliers were misled. But of those feelings he was the master and not the slave. Like the hero¹ of Homer, he enjoyed all the pleasures of fascination; but he was not fascinated. He listened to the song of the Sirens;² yet he glided by without being seduced to their fatal shore. He tasted the cup of Circe;³ but he bore about him a sure antidote against the effects of its bewitching sweetness. The illusions which captivated his imagination never impaired his reasoning powers. The statesman was proof against the splendor, the solemnity, and the romance which enchanted the poet. Any person who will contrast the sentiments expressed in his treatises on Prelacy with the exquisite lines on ecclesiastical architecture and music in the "Penseroso," which was published about the same time, will understand our meaning. This is an inconsistency which, more

¹ Ulysses, the hero of Homer's *Odyssey*.

² The Sirens were maidens who, as related by Homer, lived on an island in the ocean, to which they lured passing mariners by their sweet songs, only to destroy them. Ulysses, forewarned by Circe, stuffed the ears of his companions with wax, and had himself lashed to a mast, until they had sailed out of hearing of the fatal songs.

³ A sorceress who by her drugs changed human beings into wolves, lions, swine, etc. She thus changed twenty-two of Ulysses' companions, but the hero himself, having obtained from Mercury an antidote in the herb moly, was proof against her charm.

than anything else, raises his character in our estimation, because it shows how many private tastes and feelings he sacrificed, in order to do what he considered his duty to mankind. It is the very struggle of the noble Othello.¹ His heart relents; but his hand is firm. He does naught in hate, but all in honor. He kisses the beautiful deceiver before he destroys her.

That from which the public character of Milton derives its great and peculiar splendor still remains to be mentioned. If he exerted himself to overthrow a forsworn king and a persecuting hierarchy, he exerted himself in conjunction with others. But the glory of the battle which he fought for the species of freedom which is the most valuable, and which was then the least understood, the freedom of the human mind, is all his own. Thousands and tens of thousands among his contemporaries raised their voices against ship money and the Star Chamber. But there were few indeed who discerned the more fearful evils of moral and intellectual slavery, and the benefits which would result from the liberty of the press and the unfettered exercise of private judgment. These were the objects which Milton justly conceived to be the most important. He was desirous that the people should think for themselves as well as tax themselves, and should be emancipated from the dominion of prejudice as well as from that of Charles. He knew that those who, with the best intentions, overlooked these schemes of reform, and contented themselves with pulling down the king and imprisoning the malignants, acted like the heedless brothers in his own poem, who, in their eagerness to disperse the train of the sorcerer, neglected the means of liberating the captive. They thought only of conquering when they should have thought of disenchanting.

“Oh, ye mistook, ye should have snatch'd his wand,
And bound him fast; without his rod reversed,

¹ The hero of Shakespeare's play of that name, upon whose simple nature the villain Iago works, till he is persuaded that his wife Desdemona is false to him.

And backward mutters of dissevering power,
 We cannot free the Lady that sits here
 In stony fetters fix'd, and motionless."¹

To reverse the rod, to spell the charm backward, to break the ties which bound a stupefied people to the seat of enchantment, was the noble aim of Milton. To this all his public conduct was directed. For this he joined the Presbyterians; for this he forsook them. He fought their perilous battle; but he turned away with disdain from their insolent triumph. He saw that they, like those whom they had vanquished, were hostile to the liberty of thought. He therefore joined the Independents, and called upon Cromwell to break the secular chain, and to save free conscience from the paw of the Presbyterian wolf.² With a view to the same great object, he attacked the licensing system,³ in that sublime treatise which every statesman should wear as a sign upon his hand and as frontlets between his eyes. His attacks were, in general, directed less against particular abuses than against those deeply seated errors on which almost all abuses are founded,—the servile worship of eminent men and the irrational dread of innovation.

That he might shake the foundations of these debasing sentiments more effectually, he always selected for himself the boldest literary services. He never came up in the rear, when the outworks had been carried and the breach entered. He pressed into the forlorn hope. At the beginning of the changes, he wrote with incomparable energy and eloquence against the bishops. But, when his opinion seemed likely to prevail, he passed on to other subjects, and abandoned prelacy to the crowd of writers who now hastened to insult a falling party. There is no more hazardous enterprise than that of bearing the torch of truth into

¹ *Comus*, lines 815–819.

² "Help us to save free conscience from the paw
 Of hireling wolves, whose gospel is their maw."

MILTON'S *Sonnet to Cromwell*.

³ See Introduction, p. 14.

those dark and infected recesses in which no light has ever shone. But it was the choice and the pleasure of Milton to penetrate the noisome vapors, and to brave the terrible explosion. Those who most disapprove of his opinions must respect the hardihood with which he maintained them. He, in general, left to others the credit of expounding and defending the popular parts of his religious and political creed. He took his own stand upon those which the great body of his countrymen reprobated as criminal, or derided as paradoxical. He stood up for divorce and regicide. He attacked the prevailing systems of education. His radiant and beneficent career resembled that of the god of light and fertility : —

“Nitor in adversum ; nec me, qui cætera, vincit
Impetus, et rapido contrarius evehor orbi.”¹

It is to be regretted that the prose writings of Milton should, in our time, be so little read. As compositions, they deserve the attention of every man who wishes to become acquainted with the full power of the English language. They abound with passages compared with which the finest declamations of Burke² sink into insignificance. They are a perfect field of cloth of gold. The style is stiff with gorgeous embroidery. Not even in the earlier books of the “Paradise Lost” has the great poet ever risen higher than in those parts of his controversial works in which his feelings, excited by conflict, find a vent in bursts of devotional and lyric rapture. It is, to borrow his own majestic language, “a sevenfold chorus of hallelujahs and harping symphonies.”

We had intended to look more closely at these performances,

¹ “I contend against opposing circumstances ; that force which subdues other things affects me not, and I am borne in a direction contrary to the swiftly moving world.”—OVID's *Metamorphoses*, Book II., lines 72, 73.

² Edmund Burke (1729–97), a distinguished orator, statesman, and political and philosophical writer.

to analyze the peculiarities of the diction, to dwell at some length on the sublime wisdom of the "*Areopagitica*"¹ and the nervous rhetoric of the "*Iconoclast*,"² and to point out some of those magnificent passages which occur in the "*Treatise of Reformation*," and the "*Animadversions on the Remonstrant*." But the length to which our remarks have already extended renders this impossible.

We must conclude. And yet we can scarcely tear ourselves away from the subject. The days immediately following the publication of this relic of Milton appear to be peculiarly set apart, and consecrated to his memory. And we shall scarcely be censured if, on this his festival, we be found lingering near his shrine, how worthless soever may be the offering which we bring to it. While this book lies on our table, we seem to be contemporaries of the writer. We are transported a hundred and fifty years back. We can almost fancy that we are visiting him in his small lodging; that we see him sitting at the old organ beneath the faded green hangings; that we can catch the quick twinkle of his eyes, rolling in vain to find the day; that we are reading in the lines of his noble countenance the proud and mournful history of his glory and his affliction. We image to ourselves the breathless silence in which we should listen to his slightest word; the passionate veneration with which we should kneel to kiss his hand and weep upon it; the earnestness with which we should endeavor to console him, if indeed such a spirit could need consolation, for the neglect of an age unworthy of his talents and his virtues; the eagerness with which we should contest with his daughters, or with his Quaker friend Ellwood,³ the privilege of reading Homer to him, or of taking down the immortal accents which flowed from his lips.

These are perhaps foolish feelings. Yet we cannot be ashamed of them; nor shall we be sorry if what we have written shall in

¹ See Introduction, p. 14.

² See Introduction, p. 16.

³ Thomas Ellwood. See Introduction, p. 18.

any degree excite them in other minds. We are not much in the habit of idolizing either the living or the dead. And we think that there is no more certain indication of a weak and ill-regulated intellect than that propensity which, for want of a better name, we will venture to christen Boswellism.¹ But there are a few characters which have stood the closest scrutiny and the severest tests, which have been tried in the furnace and have proved pure, which have been weighed in the balance and have not been found wanting, which have been declared sterling by the general consent of mankind, and which are visibly stamped with the image and superscription of the Most High. These great men we trust that we know how to prize; and of these was Milton. The sight of his books, the sound of his name, are pleasant to us. His thoughts resemble those celestial fruits and flowers which the Virgin Martyr² of Massinger sent down from the gardens of Paradise to the earth, and which were distinguished from the productions of other soils, not only by superior bloom and sweetness, but by miraculous efficacy to invigorate and to heal. They are powerful, not only to delight, but to elevate and purify. Nor do we envy the man who can study either the life or the writings of the great poet and patriot, without aspiring to emulate, not indeed the sublime works with which his genius has enriched our literature, but the zeal with which he labored for the public good, the fortitude with which he endured every private calamity, the lofty disdain with which he looked down on temptations and dangers, the deadly hatred which he bore to bigots and tyrants, and the faith which he so sternly kept with his country and with his fame.

¹ From James Boswell, who wrote the *Life of Dr. Samuel Johnson*, which, though fulsome in its eulogy of that writer, is conceded to be the greatest of all works in biography, and is so pronounced by Macaulay.

² A play by Philip Massinger (1554-1640), one of the Elizabethan dramatists.

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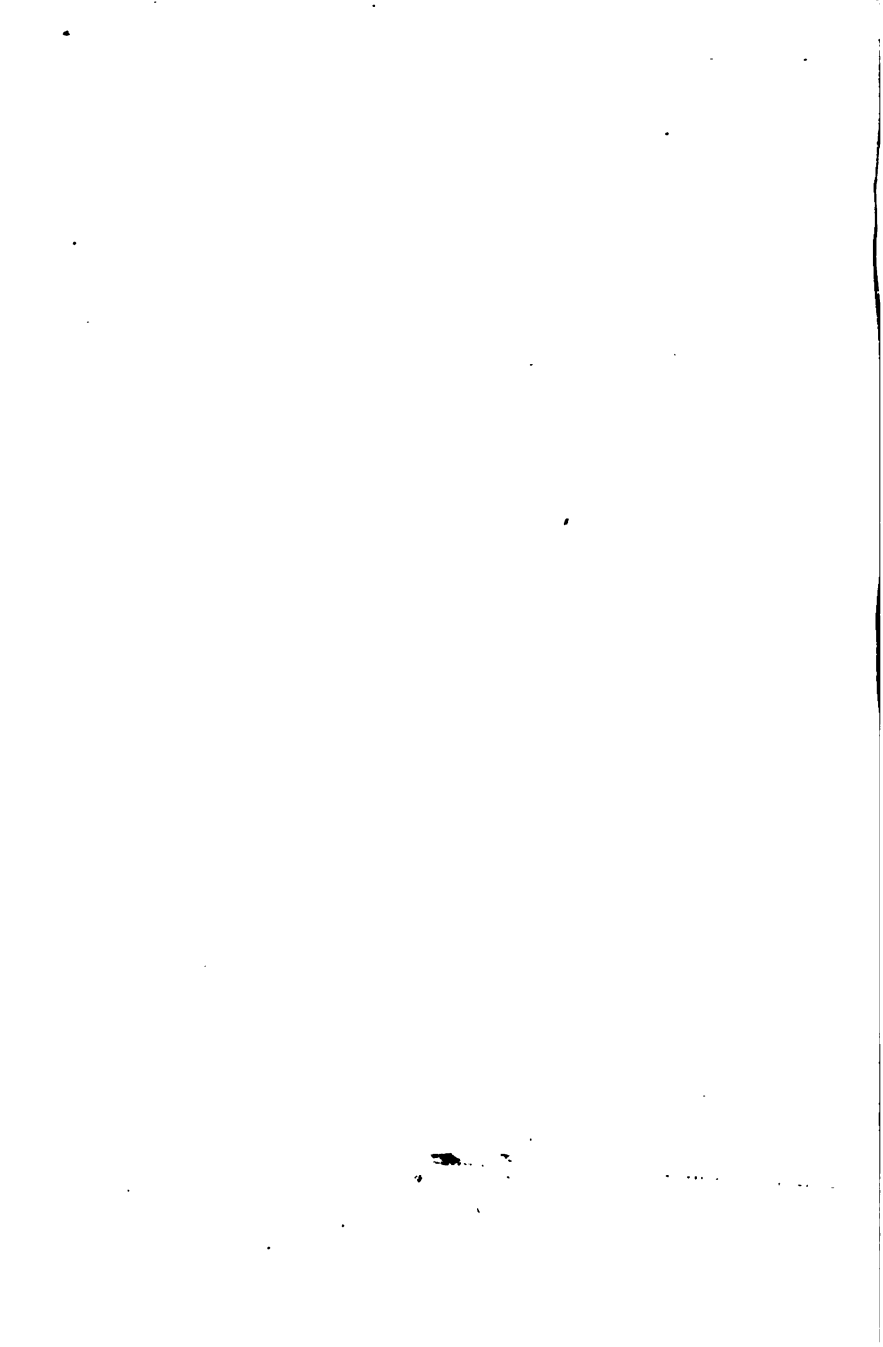
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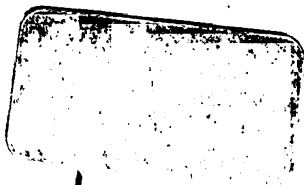




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